

PUTTING TOGETHER THE PIECES OF ME:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A TEACHING PRINCIPAL
IN AN EXCEPTIONALLY SMALL RURAL SCHOOL

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By
Joyce A. de Gooijer

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Abstract

Two factors—role duality and school size—impact teaching principals’ abilities to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. Principals with significant teaching loads experience “role duality” a situation in which one person fills two distinct roles. Teaching principals experience role tension and conflicts between professional teaching concerns, leadership demands and management issues. Further tensions are created when policymaker’s demands fail to recognize complexities around the roles of a teaching principal working in a unique context (Dunning, 1993; Wilson & McPake, 2000). Specifically, though the tensions of role duality are known to be more challenging in small schools, *exceptionally* small schools are a different context altogether. My autoethnographic study examined the complexity of my teaching principal’s role in an exceptionally small rural school. It was guided by a central question: How does the context of an exceptionally small, rural school impact upon a teaching principal’s role(s)? Sub questions included: (a) How do stakeholder expectations (school staff, community, division, Ministry) impact a teaching principal’s roles and responsibilities in an exceptionally small rural school? and (b) What challenges and opportunities does a teaching principal face in an exceptionally small rural school? Documentation from two daily personal journals and my ‘what I do’ log during the 2009 – 2010 school year provided research data. My analysis focused on three themes: fractured roles, capacity to meet expectations and establishing relationships. This study added to current research rich narratives describing the impact of an exceptionally small school on a teaching principal’s role.

Keywords: teaching principal, small school, fractured roles, relationships, expectations

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Dedication

I would first like to dedicate my thesis to staff, students and parents from the exceptionally small rural school on which my autoethnography is based. You know who you are. Though the thesis discusses struggles and challenges associated with my roles, I do not regret my time as teaching principal in our school. My experiences moved me to write. For the camaraderie and support I received from staff, I will be forever grateful. To my students, M.P., A.L., C.W., C.L., and L.T. – you challenged me to be a better teacher, principal, and person. I learned so much working with you.

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I save the most significant dedication for my husband, John. When I returned from the China trip saying, “I’m going to start my Masters”, then later surprised you with, “I’m switching to thesis”, you shook your head as if to say, “Here she goes again,” and completely supported my decisions. You’ve taken on so much and covered for me not being at home. You just keep saying, “If you want it – go do it.” Your faith in my abilities has meant so much to me. I am blessed to have you in my life.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Two factors—role duality and school size—impact teaching principals’ abilities to fulfill their roles and responsibilities (Dunning, 1993). Principals with significant teaching loads experience “role duality” a situation in which one person fills two distinct roles. Teaching principals experience role tension and conflicts between professional teaching concerns, leadership demands and management issues. Further tensions are created by policymakers when their demands fail to recognize complexities around the roles of a teaching principal (Dunning; Wilson & McPake, 2000). Role duality may be more prevalent in small schools.

Research Question

Human resources may be scarce in small schools, resulting in principals taking on a significant teaching role. In smaller schools, principals also have fewer opportunities to delegate responsibilities. A wide range of management tasks is associated with principals’ roles in smaller schools (Wilson & McPake, 2000).

Whereas the tensions of role duality are known to be more challenging in small schools, exceptionally small schools are a different context altogether. My research examined the complexity of my teaching principal’s role in an exceptionally small rural school. It was guided by a central question: How does the context of an exceptionally small rural school impact upon a teaching principal’s role(s)? Sub questions addressed in my research included: (a) How do stakeholder expectations (school staff, community, division, Ministry) impact a teaching principal’s roles and responsibilities in an exceptionally small rural school? and (b) What challenges and opportunities does a teaching principal face in an exceptionally small rural school?

The Researcher

Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts (Rushdie, 1991, p.2).

My teaching career began in 1978. Since then, I have been blessed with opportunities that prepared me for my administrative role in which I was positioned when I began my research. A desire for change, travel, and personal challenges has translated into teaching and administrative experiences in nine schools. Settings have included Saskatchewan rural public and Catholic schools (including one boarding school), a remote school in Kenya, Africa, and an isolated school on the island of Abaiang in Kiribati, Central Pacific.

My first principalship was in a small rural Saskatchewan kindergarten to grade eight school. It was 1982. I was young. I had no formal administrative training. The school consisted of four portables: three classrooms and a library. My portable housed thirty grade three to five students. I had neither an office nor administration time. An extra long extension cord reaching into the bathroom provided a location for private phone conversations. Students were called back to class in traditional style: using an old fashioned, hand-rung school bell. Principal meetings, instructional leadership, assessments, and interaction with other agencies were non-existent. Eight o'clock was my arrival time; I consistently left at 5:00 p.m.

Fourteen years later I once again found myself in administration. Within six months, a two year volunteer teaching position at St. Joseph's College, Tabwiroa, Kiribati, evolved into a teaching principalship. I was no more ready for administration than I had been the first time. No similarities between this and my previous experiences existed. I was unaware of the school and country's cultures, did not know the school system's structure or understand the language.

Teaching was a fifty percent position and administration a twenty four hour position, where I was constantly on call. Four hundred of four hundred fifty students boarded year round. I was responsible for everything: discipline, academic and extracurricular programming, responding to illnesses, timetables, staffing, substance abuse by some students and staff, ensuring that thatch roofs on staff houses were in good repair, and boats were hired to take students off the island during school breaks. Sounds of girls sweeping leaves or boys playing soccer was my 6:00 a.m. wake up call. The generator being shut down at 10:00 p.m. leaving our 20 acre compound in darkness marked the un-official end to my workday.

Though the job was exhausting, it was an opportunity to develop communication, leadership, and organizational skills. Role modeling to students and staff replaced communicating through language. I learned that extracurricular activities would unfold in their time, not mine. Patience was not only a virtue, but a necessity. To support me in unknown aspects of their culture, staff developed a school team consisting of one junior staff, one senior staff and the catechist. Of equal importance in my growth was Sr. Rotee, a colleague and mentor who guided me through customs, culture and friendship.

Returning to Saskatchewan, I accepted a teaching principal position in a 217 student rural school where the elementary and secondary schools were situated three blocks apart. A vice-principal was based in the elementary school for three of the four years. Over a ten year period, a series of crises had left the school in turmoil. Skills I learned in Kiribati – multi-tasking, communication skills, the importance of understanding culture, role modeling, building team and problem solving – served me well in my new school. Steven LaPointe, our school counselor, and my mentor and friend, guided me through team building and school management processes.

Leaving that school, I accepted a teaching principal position in an exceptionally small rural school. I held this position for four years. There were 51 Kindergarten to grade eight students, and each of four teachers instructed two to four grades. Of interest to me were colleagues' comments expressing concerns that going to a smaller school was a 'step backward'. To the contrary, school size does not imply an easier or lighter workload. Stakeholder expectations are no less demanding than in larger schools. This school was dealing with the aftermath of an in-school crisis, and was facing another crisis: school review.

I began this position with fifty percent administration time, taught math and English Language Arts to a combined grade five and six class, and computers to a grade seven and eight class. This past year, a learning resource teacher (LRT) role was added to my teaching and administrative roles, statistically creating a 1.529 full time equivalent position. Each role required specific knowledge and skills, and availability of and access to resources. I also coached, was staff advisor for our student leadership council, and the yearbook committee teacher consultant. Administration and LRT time totaled one of our four full time teacher equivalents. Support staff included 1.5 educational assistant equivalents, a 1.0 secretary/librarian, and part time caretaker. Once again, I was fortunate to work with a stellar school counselor, Carol Ruys, who mentored me through changing roles and responsibilities.

My professional experiences have been in small schools where, as a teaching principal, I assumed simultaneous multiple roles and distinct challenges. I was frequently torn between the roles, prioritizing, second guessing, and selectively choosing which expectations or initiatives were not only more important, but might not be fully met or accomplished. I was often the sole decision maker. Before the school-based LRT left on maternity leave, together we conducted parent-school team meetings, performed educational assistant evaluations, completed student

personal programs plans, and team taught. I was now single-handedly responsible for signing Request for Support forms as the homeroom teacher, principal, and LRT. I grieved the loss of the LRT position and constantly struggled with my effectiveness within these roles.

Consistent in all administrative positions I have occupied has been responsibilities in at least two distinct roles: teaching and administration. Not having a vice principal, neither have I had the opportunity to share workloads and have a cohort with whom I can share decision making, nor have I become proficient in job-specific roles such as budgeting or LRT planning. Also consistent has been community expectations for attending functions such as hockey games, figure skating carnivals, and fowl suppers. All administrative positions have allowed me the opportunity to see the ‘big picture’. I am aware of all details around school functioning and students in the school. These experiences have led me to question the uniqueness of rural teaching principals’ roles and responsibilities in exceptionally small schools.

Context

Literature describing teaching principals’ roles provided context to my experiences. “Role duality” describes a combined teacher, managerial, and leadership role where teaching principals continuously prioritize, selectively choose, or, given no choice, respond to the role needing their immediate attention (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Dunning, 1993; Wilson & McPake, 2000). Role tension is experienced by teaching principals with significant teaching time (Wilson & McPake). Limited time for intensive individualized student instruction, difficulty keeping up with curriculum implementation and educational initiatives, and inadequate time to fulfill instructional leadership responsibilities characterize issues associated with the dual role (Starr & White, 2008; Wilson & McPake). Associated with role tension is a wide range of tasks for

which teaching principals are responsible. These tasks may vary from programming to unblocking drains (Wilson & McPake).

Small schools are typically challenged by few human resources. This impacts the operation, organization, and implementation of school improvement. Schools have a limited pool of expertise which may make implementing new initiatives more difficult compared to larger schools. Delegating responsibilities or establishing work groups is difficult, if not impossible (Dunning, 1993; Wilson & McPake, 2000). The school management team is often the entire staff. Limited professional personnel to implement tasks results in increased time needed for initiative implementation (Wilson & McPake). Associated with low staff numbers is the potential for professional isolation, where teaching heads have restricted opportunities for discussing views and concerns (Dunning).

Teaching principals in small rural schools are challenged with expectations around accountability and successful implementation of externally imposed policies. “One size fits all policies” are imposed by policy-makers who do not see small schools as distinct and therefore lack understanding around difficulties small schools experience in adhering to externally mandated changes. Expectations do not reflect disparities around school size (Arnold, 2000; Dunning, 1993; Pietsch & Williamson, 2008; Starr & White, 2008). Increased expectations and accountability to parents, administrators, and politicians leave teaching principals under greater scrutiny (Dunning).

Existing literature on small schools provides insight into teaching principals’ roles and responsibilities. Especially useful is Clarke and Wildy’s (2004), Dunning’s (1993), and Wilson and McPake’s (2000) research. Though their research helps us to understand teaching principals’ roles in small schools, they do not take into account the uniqueness of an

exceptionally small school, such as the one in which I work. My research extended current understandings of teaching principals' roles by examining it within the context of an exceptionally small rural school.

Significance

This study's significance arose from a lack of current research around teaching principals' experiences in exceptionally small rural schools. My research provides information to people immediately impacted by the position; namely, other teaching principals in exceptionally small rural schools. A further contribution is implications for policy makers' expectations and interactions with schools in this context. This research may expand their understanding of school administrators in unique contexts and assist them in responding to the complexity of teaching principals' roles. It is my hope that this research will empower other teaching principals in exceptionally small rural schools. Additionally, given that role duality is not a challenge unique to the teaching profession, my research may yield benefits for other professionals who assume multiple roles. Nursing is one such profession (Picard, 2010).

Methodology and Method

Looking back at my teaching and administrative experiences, I am aware of personal changes in pedagogical approaches. Though I have always believed that learning takes place in a social environment, where students' personal lived experiences influence how, what, and how well they learn, my beliefs are stronger than ever. I believe that learning can happen only when people are emotionally and psychologically ready. I also believe that education is within a context of people and cultures interacting. We do not work, react or interact in isolation. Therefore, a study around work lives in an educational setting cannot be accomplished outside the context of culture.

My research was guided by an autoethnographic methodological approach. Paradigmatically, autoethnography fits a constructivism-interpretivism paradigm (McIlveen, 2008; Ponterotto, 2005). This aligns with Guba and Lincoln's (2005) constructivism paradigm. Constructivist-interpretivist ontology does not support a single true reality. Rather, it supports multiple, constructed realities influenced by a person's interaction and perceptions of their social environment. With respect to ontology, autoethnography assumes a personal reality. Constructivism-interpretivism supports my belief that reality is constructed in the minds of individuals (Ponterotto, 2005), where meaning is hidden and brought to the surface through deep reflection (Schwandt as cited in Ponterotto). Within this personal reality is a belief that "social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors" (Bryman, as cited in Grix, 2002, p. 177). The researcher as an actor within the social world being studied (Anderson, 2006) describes my roles as a researcher and teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school.

My autoethnography was "a self-narrative that critiqued the situatedness of self with others in social contexts" (Spry, 2001, p. 710). Because I was the social actor immersed in the social setting of an extremely small rural school, I was in a position to reflect upon roles, challenges, and innovative strategies. Autoethnography "holds significant potential as a point of interrogation for critical, reflective practice in Education" (Austin & Hickey, 2007, p. 4).

Epistemology considers the relationship between the "knower" and "would-be-knower". Constructivist-interpretivists believe the researcher and participant must be social in nature and actively engage to truly represent the "lived experience". Autoethnography fits this epistemological belief, but is unique in that the researcher plays a dual role as researcher and participant. Unique to autoethnography is that research may not only transform the

researcher/participant, but also the reader, for whom autoethnography may “make it possible to deal more humanely with the diversity of human experience” (Ellis & Bochner, 1996, p. 25).

Because autoethnography is centered on the researcher, axiology, or the role of researchers’ values is significant to this research. Constructivist-interpretivists believe researchers’ values and lived experiences are connected to their research. Their values, therefore, must be acknowledged in research. Autoethnography discloses the researcher’s voice (Duncan, 2004; Ellis, 2004) and locates the social researcher in a cultural context (Wall, 2006) in the research (du Preez, 2008). My two personal reflective journals provided a source for data collection. My values, situated within my lived experiences naturally arose from these journals.

Methods for autoethnographical data collection includes archival data such as photographs and memoirs, “concurrent self-observation and recording” (McIlveen, 2008, p. 4) through diaries and audio-visuals, and triangulation through interviews with individuals who corroborate data or conclusions (McIlveen). Other sources of data may include personal and interview notes, transcripts, poems, artwork, (Wall, 2006) and blogging (Efimova, 2008). My data sources included two personal journals. In one journal I documented, in typed form, a detailed description of what I was involved with throughout each day, the role I played in each, and reflections around the situation. Reflections included what happened, why it happened, what actions were taken, and what I needed to consider if the situation was not resolved. Another journal was handwritten, and included reflections in prose form. I also kept a daily role/time log where I documented what I did each day, and the role and length of time I used to complete each task.

I chose autoethnography for a number of reasons. The first is that it fit me. I liked being ‘in the middle’ of situations, rather than viewing from the outside. A significant part of my job

as teaching principal was reacting to student, staff and parent needs. Self-reflection through personal growth plans, analysis of teaching methods and interactions with staff naturally occurred in my job. Autoethnography as a research method supports self-reflection. A second reason for choosing autoethnography was that the opportunity was timely. I was at a stage in my career where I had been questioning teaching principals' roles, and struggling with feelings of being unheard and misunderstood. This method provided an excellent opportunity for me to research as a complete member researcher, one within the culture being studied (Anderson, 2006). Lastly, choosing autoethnography was related to the fact that documenting was a significant part of my job and personality. Starting November 2009, my documentation included reflections around tensions and successes in my multiple roles. Autoethnography was an appropriate method because it fit well into what I naturally do.

My research was not without assumptions. I assumed there is validity in examining my own personal situation as a teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school and reflections associated with it. Included with this was an assumption that there is value in understanding firsthand experiences of a phenomenon. A second assumption was that I would be able to understand and reflect upon my situation. That my research would contribute to stakeholders' understanding of how the context of an exceptionally small rural school impacts upon a teaching principals' role was my third assumption.

Definitions

Definitions integral to this research include 'teaching principal', 'rural', and 'exceptionally small school'. Teaching principals are those who experience the demands of a 'double load', that is, a conflict between professional concerns around teaching and administrative demands of management and leadership (Clarke, 2002; Dunning, 1993).

Population, and social and cultural descriptors have been used to define *rural* (Arnold, 2000; Budge, 2006; Coladarci, 2007; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; McLaughlin, Huberman, & Hawkins, 1997; Wallin & Sackney, 2003). Rural populations in the United States constitute less than 2500 people (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Coladarci, 2007), and in Scotland is defined as having fewer than 3000 people (Dowling, 2009). Saskatchewan rural areas are described as non-urban, where urban communities have a population of more than 5000 (Ralph, 2003), and as areas with 250 students in a community of fewer than 10 000 people (Walker, Anderson, Sackney & Woolf, 2003). Social and cultural rural descriptors discussed in the literature include interconnectedness with others and a sense of place (Budge, 2006; Bushnell, 1999; Howley & Howley, 2005), social and economic decline (Arnold, 2000; Harmon, 2001; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; McLaughlin et al., 1997; Starr & White, 2008), and changes resulting from urban families migrating in search of a small town ideology (Bushnell; Pietsch & Williamson, 2008).

My personal definition of rural has been influenced by Budge (2006) and Bushnell (1999) who support rural as a sense of place, “the central cohesion point of a life interconnected with other beings” (Bushnell, p. 81). I view rural primarily as a sense of place, where rural is a feeling, emotion, and a way of thinking. Rural as a sense of place is farming, knowing people in town by name, and buying groceries in town but not paying because the owners know you will do so tomorrow. In reference to location, rural is driving into city limits to attend cultural events and have access to amenities such as stores and restaurants not available in ones’ community.

Though I primarily connect to rural as a sense of place, I cannot ignore small population and geographic isolation. I have lived in thirteen rural communities with populations between 200 and 1000. Twelve are experiencing declining populations. Businesses and facilities have

closed. Rural communities' energy focused on financial and demographic survival over-rides thinking on regional, national or international levels.

Once isolated from external influences, rural communities now include immigrant, transient, and relocated families. I believe that rural communities enjoy their traditional culture and may not be willing to embrace new ideas and philosophies. Sense of place, visibility, a declining population, and increases in immigrant, transient and relocated populations describe the rural school-community setting for my research.

Similar to rural definitions, researchers describe small schools through population definitions or descriptors. Distinctions are made between small and very small schools (Cotton, 2000; Ewington et al., 2008; McLaughlin et al., 1997; Meier, 1996; Wilson, 2009). American research identifies small schools as having populations between 300 and 400 (Cotton; Meier). Victoria, Australia has small schools with fewer than 70 students (Ewington et al.). Scotland has 400 'very small schools', each with fewer than 50 pupils. They may have a single teacher, or no more than three teachers, including the headteacher (Wilson).

Research addressing Saskatchewan small schools is relevant in that it provides me information around my exceptionally small rural school context. Research stemming from rural settings received attention in the past (Gunningham, 2006; Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 1995). Small schools were described as being located in towns, villages and hamlets of fewer than 1000 people and having fewer than 20 students and often fewer than 10 students per grade (Gunningham). Absent from the literature is small school research after 2006. Perhaps with school division restructuring, new considerations around the small school context will be necessary.

Exceptionally small rural school research is limited to Australian research with student populations fewer than 100 (Clarke & Wildy, 2004), Scottish schools with one, two, or three teachers (Wilson & McPake, 2000) and Gunningham's (2006) description of Saskatchewan small schools which may have fewer than 10 students and usually fewer than 20 students per grade. My research added to current descriptions of exceptionally small rural schools, and described how teaching principals' roles are impacted in this context.

Small school descriptors are associated with a sense of belonging, community, teamwork, familiarity and flexibility (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Jimerson, 2006; McRobbie, 1990; Meier, 1996; Murdock & Schiller, 2002). When teachers know students, a strong sense of belonging is created, student alienation is reduced and resiliency is increased (Cotton, 2002; McRobbie, 1990; Meier, 1996; Murdock & Schiller, 2002). Teachers have an opportunity to know students as individuals, be aware of their interests, challenges and gifts, and know how they learn (Meier). Staff collegiality creates a school community rather than a collection of classes (Jimerson, 2006; McRobbie, 1990; Meier, 1996; Murdock & Schiller, 2002). This results in improved teacher attitudes, increased staff morale, a greater likelihood of peer accountability, and teachers' sense of responsibility for the entire school.

Research does not provide a consistent definition of 'small schools' and rarely addresses 'exceptionally small schools'. My exceptionally small school research base was delimited to our school setting and context and provides a personal definition of an exceptionally small school. Ours was a kindergarten to grade 8 school with 50 students. All individual grades had fewer than ten students. A minimum double grade combination existed in all classrooms, that is, teachers simultaneously instructed a minimum of two grades. Three and a half full time teacher equivalents, a 0.489 learning resource teacher and 0.54 principal position were filled by four

professional staff. Individually, these criteria do not necessarily describe an exceptionally small school. Combining criteria into one unique setting defined our exceptionally small school. My research was conducted in this unique context, adding to limited and dated Saskatchewan research on exceptionally small rural schools.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations to this study are defined within autoethnographic methodology, that is, it is a study of self. Narrative reflections were delimited to the 2009 – 2010 school year, and at the time of writing, were mostly historical in nature. Though this study was conducted within the confines of delimitations, it warranted examination. Autoethnography has the ‘potential to act as a stimulus for profound understanding of a single case’ (McIlveen, 2008, p 5), power to address unanswered questions, and present researchers’ new and unique ideas (Wall, 2006).

Autoethnography has been open to criticism and rejection as a scholarly work (Holt, 2003; Sparkes, 2000). Because research was done within the context of one school through my professional and personal experiences, generalizations cannot be made to all teaching principals, or all exceptionally small rural schools. Another limitation was the extent of my ability and courage to reveal thoughts and beliefs usually kept private (Ellis, 1999), and to what degree self-disclosure and honesty were personally difficult or distressing (Ellis, 2004).

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This literature review considered and addressed research around teaching principals' roles in exceptionally small rural schools. Research primarily exists from Australia (Murdock & Schiller, 2002), the United Kingdom (Wilson, 2009; Wilson & McPake, 2000) and the United States (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Grady, 1990). Research in a Canadian context is found in Hunt (2000), Meyer and Macmillan (2001), and Wallin and Sackney's (2003) research. Current Canadian and Saskatchewan research around this topic is meager at best. Strands of literature reviewed in this chapter include topics referring to principals' dual roles in small rural schools. My literature review was framed by these questions:

1. What current issues for rural schools impact a principal's role?
2. What is role duality and how does it help define teaching principals' roles in exceptionally small rural schools?

These questions have guided my literature review and were important because they provided a foundation to my research question: How does the context of an exceptionally small rural school impact upon a teaching principal's role? Understanding rural school issues teaching principals' dual roles was necessary to develop a context around which my research was constructed. A rural context was used to describe community expectations around rural principals' school and community roles. In turn, the research provided a framework to view principals' unique roles in exceptionally small schools. A second theme, teaching principals' role duality, will be addressed. Three components of role duality - management, leadership and teaching - will be addressed within an exceptionally small rural school context.

Little research considering a Saskatchewan rural teaching principal context exists. Saskatchewan School Boards Association's (SSBA) website contains limited research. Five publications were written between 1979 and 2006. Renihan's (n.d.) Saskatchewan principalship study dedicated a small portion to small schools. Twenty SSBA reports deal with leadership, yet none specifically address rural teaching principals' roles in school leadership. Interestingly, there has been no published research on this topic since Saskatchewan's Ministry of Education imposed School Division amalgamations in January, 2006.

In writing this review, I did not consult research regarding attracting, training, or mentoring teaching principals. My primary interest was researching current issues for teaching principals, not how training has affected their ability to do their job. Also excluded is research around female teaching principals in exceptionally small rural schools. As a female teaching principal, this was a difficult decision. In selecting my topic, I struggled with whether I should address gender issues around the role. I do not hide nor disregard the fact that gender plays a role in my position. I chose to consider global issues associated with the teaching principal role, rather than focus on gender specific issues. Though this would be an excellent topic for further research, I was interested in teaching principal roles, regardless of gender.

Rural schools experience issues and concerns unique to their school size and context. "One size fits all" policies, interactions with parents, and school closures and consolidations will be addressed.

Rural School Issues

Rural school issues include lack of support resources and services, change in governance structures, lack of qualified teachers, changing student needs, decreasing school populations, and fluctuating class sizes (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Barnett, McCormick & Connors, 2001; Howley

et al., 1999; Monk, 2007; Ralph, 2003; Starr & White, 2008). Additional issues include poverty, under financing, greater per pupil costs, isolation, English as an Alternate Language (EAL) students, higher numbers of teachers working outside their specialty area, and high student turnover (Arnold, 2000; Chance as cited in Eady and Zepeda, 2007; Harmon, 2001; Johnson & Strange, 2005). Bryant (2007) expanded on issues around decreasing school population and funding, indicating that schools may be forced to cut programs and staff, which in turn “can also lead to school closure, school consolidation and district reconfigurations” (Rural Policy Matters as cited in Bryant). Monk (2007) added public policy, student characteristics, and higher operational costs. “One size fits all” policies, English language learners, high needs students, working with parents, and school closure and consolidation are issues I experience as a teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school and will be addressed in detail.

“One Size Fits All” Policies and the “Slipstream Syndrome”

In 1910 Foght argued that rural schools receive little attention from organized educational authorities. Ninety years later, the issue continues to exist, now set in the context of “one size fits all” policies. Policy-makers lacking information and understanding about small rural school life and leadership challenges assume that generic policies can be equally implemented by small and large schools (Arnold, 2000; Dunning, 1993; Pietsch & Williamson, 2008; Starr & White, 2008). Though needs, resources and capacities differ (Arnold), small schools are expected to conform to educational models designed for urban counterparts (Jess, as cited in Bryant, 2007). Small schools have difficulty complying with policy expectations (Brundrett, 2006; Bryant; Dunning; Harmon, Gordanier, Henry & George, 2007; Monk, 2004; Pietsch & Williamson; Starr & White; Wallin, 2008). Wallin extended this thought to isolated schools, indicating that policy makers ignore these schools’ social context and school diversity.

Because little is known about small school complexities, policy makers give rural schools less attention than urban schools. Limited consideration is given to government initiatives and compliance expectations in a rural context (Arnold, 2000; Starr & White, 2008; Wallin, 2008). These expectations can have adverse effects, where small schools not only lose sight of their strengths by trying to emulate large schools, but appear deficient when judged by standards used to evaluate larger schools (Bryant, 2007; *Small Schools*, 1989).

The question in my setting is can exceptionally small rural schools realistically adhere to and adequately implement externally imposed system initiatives? Policy makers not only fail to see small schools as distinct in a diverse educational system, but fail to recognize and understand individual small schools' capacities to implement externally mandated changes (Bryant, 2007; Clarke, 2002; Dunning, 1993; Wallin, 2008). Rural schools have fewer people to manage the work, yet governments put impossible demands on them to implement the same initiatives as larger schools (Wallin).

This impacts teaching heads caught in a "slip-stream syndrome" (Dunning, 1993), in which teaching principals are left to interpret and adapt externally imposed initiatives based on changes created for larger scale schools. Managing social programming implementation, and curriculum and legislation initiatives is achieved by determining priorities and deploying resources with ingenuity (Clarke, 2002; Dunning; Wallin, 2008). Governments must provide adequate resources to ensure the effective implementation of curriculum (Wallin). Other challenges associated with implementing mandated initiatives includes limited finances, fewer management support services, greater pupil costs and higher numbers of teachers working outside their specialty areas (Chance as cited in Eady and Zepeda, 2007; McLaughlin et al., 2007). The "slipstream syndrome" is significant in my role as a teaching principal of an

exceptionally small rural school. As a personal example, schools are required to participate in the Ministry's Assessment for Learning (AFL) and use results to help develop their Learning Improvement Plan. With fewer than five students in the assessed grade, we are too small to receive school-specific results, yet are required to use the results when developing our Learning Improvement Plan. My research will help define and explain how the "slipstream syndrome" affects teaching principals' complex roles.

Consistent with issues arising from the "slipstream syndrome" is meeting diverse student needs. "School leaders have to ponder the rhetoric and reality of how they address questions of diversity in school," (Riehl, 2000, p. 56). Schools today provide support for more heterogeneous populations where they see more diversity in race, ethnicity, social class, gender, national origin, language, sexual orientation, physical disabilities, academic and behaviour needs. Rural schools are required to meet these needs and those of highly mobile children from lower income migrant farm workers. Parallel to inner city schools, rural schools fear impact on school scores and may be reluctant to accept students and impoverished families moving from community to community (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Bryant, 2007; Monk, 2007; Ralph, 2003).

Rural schools, short on staff and resources, may be challenged to meet the same student needs as urban schools (McRobbie, 1990). Staff size and limited training may make it difficult for exceptionally small rural schools to adequately support the variety of high needs students. How must school divisions adjust staffing decisions to ensure that all student needs in exceptionally small rural schools are being met? School divisions reviewing their staffing formula to provide for more qualified staff, and providing training for existing teachers may be part of a solution.

Rural schools' capacities to address English language learners' needs are not frequently addressed in the literature. It is becoming an issue of increasing concern. Statistics Canada (2009) indicated a 1.6% growth in Saskatchewan's immigrant population. Non-English speaking students enroll in schools that have little experience to address this need (Monk, 2007). Educational infrastructures are not prepared to handle the influx (James & Martin, 2009). Rural schools face challenges recruiting and retaining highly qualified staff who can meet English language learner needs (Ashbaker & Wilder as cited in James & Martin) and may be challenged to provide pre-school language immersion, literacy outreach, in-school student literacy, and parent-based literacy programs (James & Martin). Ministerial demands of inclusion, expectations around differentiated instruction and limited resources contribute to the challenge. My research will include reflections on how teaching principals in exceptionally small schools are challenged to meet students' diverse needs and Ministerial demands.

Meeting students' diverse needs is a significant challenge for teaching principals. Working with students is not done in isolation, but within the context of parents and school communities.

Interaction with Parents

Small rural schools depend on community support, yet must achieve a balance between parental involvement and possible interference (Wilson, 2009). Parental involvement includes volunteering and attending all school activities (Wilson), yet also includes government legislated involvement through school advisory councils (Meyer & Macmillan, 2001). Saskatchewan government initiatives such as Learning Improvement Plans, Personal Program Plans for high needs students and revamping local boards into School Community Councils has changed interactions, roles and responsibilities among administrators, students, teachers, and the school

community. These new initiatives demand community involvement in new ways. School Community Councils must approve school fundraisers, and have input into school procedures and School Learning Improvement Plans (Saskatchewan School Boards Association, n.d.).

Close parent-teacher interactions may lead to parents turning to school for advice with personal problems (Webb & Vulliamy, 1996). Personal experience has included a parent requesting the phone number for social services to report their child, another parent approaching the school for assistance with a spousal problem, and a number of families attempting to draw the school into mediating non school based inter-family conflicts.

School Closure and Consolidation

“If schools become too small they will close,” (Starr & White, 2008, p. 6). Efforts to close small schools complicate principals’ planning (Howley, Howley and Larson, 1999) and may result in a principal losing his/her job (Starr & White). Barley and Beesley (2007) similarly supported concerns with school consolidation, suggesting that administrators and teachers play a role in identifying and building new identities when schools and communities with dissimilar values, culture, and world views are joined.

Limited research exists around school division consolidations, school closures, and the impact on small rural schools and communities. “Consolidation is the most divisive issue in rural school reform” (Arnold, 2000). In their *School Review Handbook*, Saskatchewan Education (2008), dictated communities’ roles within the school review (school closure) process, indicating communities’ responsibilities around being informed of the steps, timing, and public participation. Educational capacity built alongside community development allows sustainability to replace fear around school failure (Starr & White, 2008). Schools are more likely to promote community pride and educational opportunities when assured of on-going viability and staff

stability (Starr & White). This is another example of stakeholder expectations. The Ministry and school division define the principal's role in the school review process, yet community expectations may be quite different, where they expect principals to publically fight to keep the school open.

Of all rural school issues addressed, “one size fits all policies” received most attention in literature. Supporting student diversity, connection with parents, and school consolidation are also relevant to this study because they describe issues and concerns teaching principals address in their limited administration time.

Rural Teaching Principals' Roles

Rural teaching principals' roles in small schools have maintained a consistent description since 1967 where changes in role complexity have not been recognized (Dunning, 1993). Viewing the role as a composite of many roles provides an opportunity to study increasing complexities in teaching principals' 'role duality'. Three main roles within role duality—leadership, management, and teaching—warrant discussion.

Role Duality

“Role duality”, also described as double-load, role multiplicity and juggling acts, has been used to define the teaching head role (Dunning, 1993; Starr & White, 2008; Wilson, 2009). Teaching principals, responsible for meeting learning needs as teachers are also accountable for requirements imposed by system authorities who view teaching principals as leaders or managers (Dunning; Murdock & Schiller, 2002). Dunning implied three teaching principal roles, adding leadership around professional development and curriculum to the management and teaching duties. Day to day demands on competing roles results in juggling priorities (Dowling, 2009; Dunning). Teaching principals experience a lack of freedom in determining a balance between

teaching and managerial responsibilities (Dunning). Their concerns around school climate and individual needs are lost in teaching, managing, disciplining, and attending to school related activities (Chance & Lindgren, 1989).

The definition of duality implies tensions between local and system priorities, teacher loyalty versus parent loyalty, self determination versus social responsibility, and teacher association rights versus individual rights (Clarke & Wildy, 2004). Dilemmas exist in providing strong shared leadership, using resources effectively, responsibility for decisions, and responding to local needs (Ewington et al., 2008). Principals experience a contradiction between perceived and actual roles, what they believe they should do compared to what they are actually doing. Role conflict results when interruptions prevent, affect, or obstruct teaching principals from performing their duties (Hunt, 2000). Roles are diverse and likely conflict unless managed effectively.

Teaching principals state lack of time as a primary disadvantage to the position (Grady, 1990). Other disadvantages include frequent interruptions, “too many meetings, inadequate time to resolve teacher problems, insufficient opportunity to complete teaching evaluations and handle discipline problems, jobs interfering with each other, pressures of the dual role and teachers feeling ignored” (p. 50). Hunt’s (2000) research echoed this, where principals indicated inadequate time as their jobs’ greatest disadvantage.

The term ‘role duality’, then, appears to be a misnomer. Role duality defines the teaching principal role, yet dual role research focuses on three roles within the position: leadership, management, and teaching (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Dunning, 1993; Murdock & Schiller, 2002). Within these roles, teaching principals experience internally and externally imposed expectations, responsibilities and accountability. Principals experience conflicts between

professional teaching concerns such as tensions of leaving classes for which one is responsible, and leadership time demands for day to day distractions, and management issues around small crises such as minor accidents, unexpected visitors, phone calls, and unexplained staff absences (Dunning). Though the literature focuses on role duality, role multiplicity may be a more appropriate description for those working in an exceptionally small rural school context. A more thorough discussion of leadership, management and teaching components is needed to help understand complexities and time commitments of the dual role in an exceptionally small rural school setting.

Teaching Principals and Leadership

One expectation on teaching principals is leadership in creating positive community relationships (Bryant, 2007). Teaching principals are willing to reach out to the community, be highly visible and approachable (Budge, 2006), and use their school role to develop productive relationships in the community (Clarke & Wildy, 2004). This increased interaction results in principals knowing students and families, thereby creating a strong sense of school community (Chance & Segura, 2009; Martin & Yin, 1999; Ralph, 2003). Matching values and interests with principals and communities is necessary for successful interactions (Bryant; Chance & Segura; Wallin & Sackney, 2003). Researchers imply an idealistic setting, where teaching principals' and communities' values match, relationships are positive, and everyone is "one big happy family".

Ewington et al. (2008) disagreed with the above view. They indicated that principals of small rural schools with 100 or fewer students are twice as likely to report negative relationships within local communities as other principals. Principals living in the community open themselves to community influences (Barnett, McCormick, and Conners, 2001) and may

experience stress around conflicting personal, professional and community involvement expectations (McRobbie, 1990). Expectations for principals to teach, coach, curl, and attend hockey games do not provide them the opportunity to get “lost” after school hours (Ralph, 2003). This leads to a question of whether community members recognize the time teaching principals need to fulfill multiple role expectations within the school setting, and with that, whether principals experience pressure to “fit in” and be involved in multiple community roles. Also worth consideration is the impact on school community relationships when principals do not live in the school community, and how principals of exceptionally small rural schools build community relationships when they reside outside their school community.

Teaching principals have unique roles around curriculum and instructional leadership. Through their dual-or multiple-role, principals are perceived to have more curriculum and instructional leadership credibility (Wilson & McPake, 2000). Instructional leadership challenges such as planning school-wide instructional improvement plans and monitoring colleagues affects teaching principals’ abilities to manage their dual role (Chance & Lindgren, 1989; Dunning, 1993; Graczewski, Knudson & Holtzman, 2009; Howley et al., 1999; Meyer & MacMillan, 2001; Murdock & Schiller, 2007; Starr & White, 2008). Teaching principals perceive themselves as instructional leaders but are not given adequate time to fulfill this role, and spend the greatest portion of their day on management issues (Chance & Lindgren; Starr & White; Wilson & Brundrett, 2005).

Teaching principals’ classroom commitments do not allow adequate time to fulfill instructional leadership responsibilities. Principal support for struggling teachers is necessary. Teaching principals’ classroom commitments restricts time to monitor colleagues (Dunning, 1993). Insufficient opportunities for teacher evaluations leave teaching principals with concerns

around supervision and accountability (Eady & Zepeda, 2007; Grady, 1990). Additionally, there is little time to form and share a school vision, a primary determinant of small school success and survival (Dunning).

Leadership is one component of duality. A second component within the teaching principal role is management. I will discuss this in the next section.

Teaching Principals and Management

Teaching principals' managerial responsibilities include managing organizational structure, resources, professional development, public relations and finance (Dowling, 2009). Additional management jobs include ordering school supplies, balancing school budgets, completing student registrations, assigning teaching workloads, and completing attendance reports, surveys, principal reports, and newsletters (Hunt, 2000). Since support during work hours is often non-existent, principals also deal with maintenance and custodial issues (Hunt).

New developments in educational legislation have resulted in greater accountability where the teaching principals' position is susceptible to "a deluge of directives" (Webb & Vulliamy, 1996, p. 303), and "vagaries of externally determined changes" (Johnson & Pickersgill, as cited in Dunning, 1993, p. 81). Systemic expectations around school improvement and reform, rather than assisting principals, are not only designed to mandate, appraise and control, but admonish when expectations are not met (Arnold, 2000; Starr & White, 2008). Principals are challenged to implement policies they perceive as irrelevant or inappropriate to small school needs (Reeves, 2003).

Issues around accountability are not necessarily unique to rural principals, but are exacerbated in the role. Increases in federal, state, and district accountability expectations lead to increased mandatory compliance (Dunning, 1993; Starr & White, 2008). Teaching principals

are accountable to parents, school division boards, upper-level management and politicians in all aspects of school performance; yet no consideration is given to school size, administration time or lack of support for principals. Accountability requirements include basic skills testing, paperwork often in the form of detailed documentation, school development plans, annual school reports, effective curriculum implementation, and a growing range of legal issues (Dunning; Meyer & MacMillan, 2001; Murdock & Schiller, 2002). Principals feel their opinions and concerns are silenced, and voices ignored (Starr & White). There is currently little understanding of how challenges and difficulties within small school settings result in teaching principals not being heard (Murdock & Schiller). Principals are left with a sense of dislocation and alienation from educational policy makers (Starr & White).

Teaching principals devise initiative implementation strategies for their small school settings. Rather than planning, implementing and reviewing, they conduct a quick audit, realistically plan for achievable targets, implement through available sources, then ‘sign off’ and move on to the next initiative. Rural teaching principals do not have time or resources to continually revisit a particular development once it is in place (Wilson & McPake, 2000).

Release time is a management issue teaching principals address (Murdock and Schiller, 2007). Administration time is often sandwiched into a school day or done before or after school (Webb & Vulliamy, 1996). Teaching principals spend longer hours, often after regular school hours, on administrative tasks (Pietsch & Williamson, 2008; Wilson & Brundrett, 2005). Lack of freedom around times to deal with administrative matters presents a challenge to teaching principals (Dunning, 1993).

Small school staffs involved in new strategy implementations are required to meet accountability regulations more suited to larger staffs. Though teachers in small schools may

lack in expertise, all coordinate several areas, often under mandated timelines and deadlines (Murdock & Schiller, 2007; Pietsch & Williamson, 2008; Wilson & Brundrett, 2005). School development plans, rapid curriculum changes, assessment and reporting procedures, and extensive policy development increase staff workloads (Wilson & McPake, 2000). Principals become teacher sanity gatekeepers, often taking on more responsibilities to protect teachers from tasks that take them away from classroom teaching. Wilson and McPake held a different view, indicating that small staffs have a greater commitment to their school and are more aware of school situations.

The first two components of duality; leadership and management have been discussed. The third component, teaching, considers the teaching role within a teaching principal context.

Teaching Principals and Teaching

Teaching in multigrade classrooms is typical in schools with fewer than 100 students (Hunt, 2000; Starr & White, 2008). A correlation exists between principals' teaching duties and student numbers, where lower enrolments result in a higher percent of teaching duties (Hunt). Most principals teach one to four hours each day with no preparation or administration periods pertaining to teaching matters (Grady, 1990). Principals' teaching roles may be undertaken to reduce class sizes and give colleagues reasonable teaching loads (Dunning, 1993).

Teaching principals have limited time for intensive individualized student instruction (Starr & White, 2008). Support personnel to assist with various diverse student ability levels is lacking. Teaching principals have difficulty keeping up with curriculum implementation, let alone educational initiatives. Limited out of class time, lack of executive staff, small teaching teams, isolation, and a thinly spread advisory staff affect their ability to provide individualized instruction (Wilson & McPake, 2000).

Balancing teacher and administrative demands has many challenges (Starr & White, 2008), that result in tension and role conflict between the two roles (Hunt, 2000; Wilson & McPake, 2000). Teaching principals are forced to leave teaching responsibilities to deal with administrative matters that include answering phones, discipline, parental inquiries, teacher needs, visits from central office, and other emergencies (Dunning, 1993; Grady, 1990; Hunt, 2000). Teaching principals jealously guard their classroom environment and often resent management and accountability responsibilities that intrude on their classroom (Murdock & Schiller, 2002).

Role duality in the teaching principal role focuses on leadership, management and teaching. Though principal isolation is not a descriptor of role duality, it plays a significant role in the context of role duality.

Teaching Principals and Isolation

Isolation from colleagues and department offices (Pietsch & Williamson, 2008), one's family (Pietsch & Williamson; Ralph, 2003) and community (Clarke & Stevens, 2006) is an additional issue for principals in small rural schools. Principals feel dislocated from debates about education policy-making and experience a lack of professional support (Starr & White, 2008). Difficulty finding supply teachers, attending meetings, and limited opportunities to exchange views with other teaching principals are issues leading to isolation (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Starr & White).

According to Dunning (1993), isolation is recognized as an issue around career advancement. Teaching principals are often young (Dunning), and use their position as a stepping stone into a larger school. Primary school teaching principals may feel trapped in their role. They may fear that admitting problems will be interpreted as inadequacy for other principal

positions (Dunning, 1993). Though teaching principal positions are considered excellent preparation for other administrative roles, teaching principals are not considered to be prepared for full time principal positions.

Rural teaching principals' roles are neither consistently defined nor described in research. Limited research addressed teaching principals' roles in exceptionally small schools (Hunt, 2000; Meier, 1996; Wilson, 2009; Wilson & McPake, 2000). There is a need to understand more clearly the methods teaching principals used in successfully balancing the roles, especially in an era of increased managerial, instructional leadership and student learning accountability.

Positive Aspects around Being a Teaching Principal

Although being a principal in a small, rural school poses many challenges, (Grady, 1990; Hunt, 2000; McRobbie, 1990; Murdock & Schiller, 2002; Wilson & McPake, 2000), some research provides a balanced perspective by pointing out positive aspects of the dual-multiple role. Teaching principals are conscious of logistical implications for implementing new initiatives, having up to date curriculum knowledge, being able to share rather than delegate tasks, experiencing staff camaraderie, maintaining their teaching skills, and having credibility based on examples they set in their classroom (Dunning, 1993; Hunt; Wilson & McPake). Knowledge of school and community, good rapport between administration and parents, and job security are experienced by some teaching principals (Hunt). Teaching principals enjoy maintaining their teacher role and see the dual role as the "best of both worlds" (Murdock & Schiller). Despite the positives, challenges continue to exist, especially for exceptionally small rural school teaching principals. Balancing leadership, management and teaching; roles that require significantly separate and unique skills, in the same time frame given to any one role in a larger school, provides significant challenges to teaching principals.

Conclusion

This literature review was conducted to provide research to the question, How does the context of an exceptionally small, rural school impact upon a teaching principal's role(s)? One key idea described actual roles. Role duality, defined more realistically as "role multiplicity", was used to describe teaching principals' teacher, managerial, and leadership roles. Impossible to separate the three roles, teaching principals continuously prioritize, selectively choose, or given no choice, respond to the role needing their immediate attention. This is significant to exceptionally small rural schools in that principals do more within the capacity of each role. Exceptionally small schools have the same number of externally imposed initiatives and expectations, yet fewer administrative bodies and less administration time than larger schools.

A second key issue was challenges faced by small rural schools. Small rural schools, having the same externally imposed expectations of compliance and accountability placed on them as larger schools, was described through "one size fits all" policies. Policy-makers do not see small schools as distinct, so do not understand difficulties they experience in adhering to externally mandated changes. Questions arising from this include: How do extremely small schools comply with unrealistic externally imposed expectations? and Is it possible for policy-makers to be made aware of, then change initiative implementations to better suit exceptionally small rural schools' unique characteristics? Other challenges include support for diverse student needs; working with parents, the extended school community and external support groups; and school closures and consolidation. Though not new challenges, they do come with new expectations. Working with parents, for example, involves deeper conversations than in previous years. Teaching principals of exceptionally small rural schools may not only interact

with parents as their child's teacher, but work together on school based goals and action plans, or collaborate through the school review and potential school closure process.

Though key issues were addressed, there is opportunity for extended research, especially in an exceptionally small school context. Opportunity for research involves issues around current changes and challenges to the teaching principals' roles arising from school division amalgamations, increased accountability through common local and provincial assessments, changes to personal program plan expectations for high needs students, increased contact with outside agencies, and compliance expectations for implementing new division and provincial initiatives.

Using an autoethnographic qualitative study, I researched my teaching principal's role in an exceptionally small school context. Chapter three will address the research methodology and method I used to design my study.

Chapter Three

Methodology and Method

In this chapter I describe my research methodology and method. Autoethnography situates the researcher within a social, political and cultural context (Wall, 2006). This study focused on my personal experiences and reflections within my exceptionally small rural school context. Consistent with the rationale that an individual is best suited to describe his or her own experience (Wall), a qualitative study in the form of an autoethnography was employed. The intent of this study was not to make generalizations about all teaching principals' roles in exceptionally small rural schools. Alternately, its intent was to provide a detailed account of my experiences and reflections that influenced, impacted and fully described various roles required in my position.

Autoethnography

If we are too busy, if we are carried away every day by our projects, our uncertainty, our craving, how can we have the time to stop and look deeply into the situation – on our own situation, the situation of our beloved one, the situation of our family and of our community, and the situation of our nation and of the other nations? (Thich Nhất Hạnh, n.d.)

Autoethnography has risen from postmodernist epistemology, a philosophy suggesting that no one way of knowing and inquiring should be privileged (Wall, 2006). Postmodernism assumes all cultures can equally claim truths (Denzin, 2006). Arising from this philosophy, literature, the arts, poetry, and drama are considered legitimate forms of inquiry (Anderson, 2006; Conquergood, 1991; Denzin; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). Autoethnographers believe that

reality is fluid, a part of oneself, and is “created by, and moves with, the changing perceptions and beliefs of the viewer” (Duncan, 2004, p. 4).

Autoethnography emphasizes the power of research to “create a space for sharing unique, subjective, evocative stories that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what we have become” (Wall, 2006, p. 3) and discloses the researcher’s signature and voice (Duncan, 2004; Ellis, 2004). In ethnography, the researcher studies a people or culture separate from herself “using first hand observation and participation in a setting or situation” (Ellis, p. 26). Autoethnography as a research method extends ethnography where the researcher is a group member (Jorgensen, 1989; Roth, 2009) located in research (du Preez, 2008) within a social, political, economic or culture context (Belbase, Luitel & Taylor, 2008; Wall). This researcher-focused method uses the researcher’s “positionality, politics, (and) values” (Ellis, p. 27) to describe her interaction with others.

Autoethnographic writing requires evocative storytelling and multiple perspectives that helps researchers understand how others make sense of their own lives. It gives researchers a voice and provides readers with insights that may help improve their own lives (Ellis, 2004).

Autoethnographic writing is a partial, local (Richardson, 2000) “self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts” (Spry, 2001; p. 710). Self cannot exist without the ‘Other’. “Self without acknowledging the Other is itself a violent (symbolic) act against the ethical condition that comes with being human” (Roth, 2009, n.p.). A person’s thoughts and beliefs come from a relationship between individuals within a culture (Roth). Autoethnographic writing reveals the challenges, struggles and successes of the Self interacting with Others in the context of researching lived experiences (Spry, 2001), and is a small part of

researchers' ever-changing lives rather than a representation of their total character or experience (Philaretou & Allen, 2006).

Autoethnography was an appropriate method for my research. Qualities of autoethnography, described above, fit my personal situation. My experience as a teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school situated me as a group member. Being employed in this position naturally located me in the social and political context of my research. Autoethnographic writing gave me a voice to reflect upon, describe and evaluate my position as a rural teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school, and may help other professions to understand and more effectively work within a similar setting.

Autoethnography and Educational Research

...we might write so as to invite readers to share our emotional responses to our professional activities and their consequences; that we might write to broaden the perspectives of nonacademic readers and enhance their practical understandings of everyday life; that we might write to practice and improve our craft for its own sake (Banks & Banks, 2000, p. 236).

Autoethnography "holds significant potential as a point of interrogation for critical, reflexive practice in Education" (Austin & Hickey, 2002, p. 4). It fights the norm, disrupts hierarchy, and presents views of those normally not heard. Autoethnography is seen as a credible methodology for educators within the education system. Educators can give a voice to unheard stories restrained by hegemonic voices that maintain the silence (Austin & Hickey). Rural teaching principals' perceptions around being unheard provide a voice to concerns that policy makers neither see small schools as distinct in a diverse educational system nor recognize

and understand individual small schools' capacities to implement externally mandated changes (Bryant, 2007; Clarke, 2002; Dunning, 1993; Wallin, 2008).

Autoethnography provides researchers a method of connecting teaching and communication through text (Banks & Banks, 2000). This method of narrative writing teaches educators about themselves, challenges the belief that they can locate their professional selves to an average experience, and forces them to be more reflexive. It teaches them about their professional and personal socialization. Autoethnography gives a voice to contradictions and tensions within a researcher's cultural context (Burdell & Swadener, 1999). My research similarly gave me a voice to discuss difficulties and challenges as a teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school. For those critical of educators' professional lives, research provides an improved understanding of teaching principals' experiences (Banks & Banks).

I "write about experiences that knock me for a loop and challenge the construction of meaning I have put together for myself....I write when my world falls apart or the meaning I have constructed for myself is in danger of doing so" (Ellis, 2004; p. 33). Though good autoethnographic writing can be therapeutic, it is not a pain-free process. Vulnerability, self scrutiny and revealing oneself to others is not easy. Emotional turmoil is not unusual (Ellis). Through reflective journaling, personal thoughts and concerns about my beliefs around my roles within the current education system surfaced, and unexpected thoughts and feelings emerged. Analyzing these feelings and reflections associated with them comprised a significant part of my autoethnography.

Research Design

Anderson's (2006) five key features of analytic autoethnography provided a framework for my research. The first key feature describes researchers as complete member researchers

(CMR), a member of the social world being studied, and “the ultimate participant in a dual participant-observer role” (Merton, as cited in Anderson, p. 379). Complete member researchers fall into two categories: opportunistic and convert. Opportunistic CMRs are either born into a group, thrown by chance or circumstance into the group, or acquired through occupation, recreation or lifestyle. Convert CMRs have interest in and conduct data-based research in a particular social setting, becoming immersed as a member during their research (Anderson). CMRs have a ‘master status’, studying their own cultural, social, ethnic, racial, religious, residential, or sexual membership. Researchers play dual roles as members of and researchers in their social world (Anderson). Autoethnographic researchers’ dual roles include documenting and analyzing their actions, participating and engaging in the research. Understandings in the dual roles of member and researcher emerge from engaged dialogue.

My autoethnographic research role was as an opportunistic CMR, a member through occupation. As a teaching principal, I was immersed in and a member of the occupation for eight years. I worked within several cultures: our school, community, school division, and provincial education systems. My dual observer-participant and member-researcher roles were analyzed within those contexts.

A second key feature is analytic reflexivity. To write about one’s individual experiences is to write about a social experience (Mykhalovsky, 1996). Introspection with the purpose of understanding oneself and others, and examining one’s actions and perceptions in relation to Self and Others is required. Self introspection and interrogation may transform researchers’ beliefs, actions and sense of self (Anderson, 2006). Reflecting on my behaviours, decisions, courses of action (both personal and with others) was common, and was, in text, an integral component to my research. Mykhalovsky and Anderson’s views resonated with me. As a teaching principal,

no decisions were made without impacting others. Some instances, such as a parent dealing with a spousal crisis, required an immediate response. It was imperative that I reflect upon my experience, evaluate my response, actions, and interactions with the parent to ensure that I had professionally and compassionately responded to their needs.

Visibility and active research in text is a third key feature. Autoethnographic research demands enhanced textual visibility of the researchers' self, illustrating how they are personally engaged in the social world they are studying. Feelings and experiences incorporated into their writing are seen as vital data for understanding the social world being observed (Anderson, 2006), and are seen as change agents within their culture (Denzin, 2003).

Effective visibility implies that researchers recount experiences and thoughts of self and others to illustrate analytic insights. Included in experiences and thoughts should be changes in beliefs and relationships, where researchers expose themselves as working through issues relevant to their membership, showing themselves as participants in a fluid rather than static social world (Anderson, 2006). Research includes studying interactions between the researcher and others, and at a deeper level, includes personality, politics, values, and the researcher who interacting with others (Ellis, 2004). My teaching principals' job was not static. When my day started, I did not know in advance which roles would require the most time. My research showed my position in a dual, and often multiple role, where responsibilities around those roles required fluidity of thoughts, actions and decisions.

Researchers construct personal meaning and value to the social world being investigated. CMRs cannot observe from the sidelines, and should not shy away from writing about contentious issues. Critical thinking in autoethnography attempts to disrupt and breakdown cultural and methodological practices (Austin & Hickey, 2007). Autoethnography can challenge

or endorse official hegemonic ways of seeing or responding to others (Denzin, 2006). Through reflection and text, researchers determine whether or how their participation transforms social understandings or relationships.

My reflective journal was the instrument used to document personal experiences as a teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school. Daily journaling and documenting about my three roles—principal, teacher or LRT—used in school-based actions and decision-making provided data to indicate my personal connection and involvement in my social world as teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school. My immersion in the school setting ensured that I did not view situations from the side lines, and allowed opportunities to reflect on continuously changing relationships and working environments.

Key feature four is dialogue with informants beyond self. Though analytic autoethnography is grounded in personal experience, researchers must reach beyond themselves as well. Understanding my personal world through self analysis and dialoguing with others was common in my role as a teaching principal. My teaching principal's role was not isolated, but steeped in conversation and interaction with others. Information retrieved from my journal provided data indicating my interaction with others and assisted in describing how these interactions played a role in external agency expectations on teaching principals in exceptionally small schools.

Anderson's (2006) fifth key feature is commitment to an analytic agenda. Analytic autoethnography's defining characteristic is not documenting personal experiences, providing an "insider's view", or evoking readers' emotional responses. The defining characteristic is using empirical data to gain insight into a broader set of social phenomenon than those provided by researchers' own data. Methods include gathering data and artifacts, participant observation,

reflective writing, and interviews (Duncan, 2004). Autoethnographic researchers see data gathering as memory work excavating “artifacts” by remembering experiences. Data analysis is conducted by explaining and reconciling self as a socially constructed individual (Austin & Hickey, 2007). Data gathered for my research came from two personal journals, one typed and the other handwritten, and a role/time chart documenting daily incidents, the role and time they required. My commitment to analytic analysis was in the form of thematic analysis and is discussed later in this chapter.

Limitations of Autoethnography

Researchers who support “highly objectified, scientific, subjectless work in which the author attempts to be absent” (Rinehart, 1998; p. 213) debate the reliability of self and self as a source of data (Hayano, 1979; Holt, 2003). Autoethnographers’ writing is seen to focus on self rather than the ‘ethno’, which in turn leaves the methodology open to rejection (Roth, 2009). Potential for self-absorption (Anderson, 2006), self-indulgence, introspection, and individualization (Holt, 2003) exists when researches are confronted with self issues.

Supporters of autoethnography argue that the label of self indulgence comes from those who mistrust the work of Self (Sparkes, 2000). Language in any form or methodology is not transparent, and no single standard of truth exists. Autoethnographic researchers, through their writing, want readers to become engaged in what they read. They want the reader to feel, care, and desire (Ellis, 2004). Writers work toward a truth that readers see as believable, lifelike, and possible (Ellis, 1999).

Criticism from empirical scientists, presuming there is an objective reality, argue that rather than represent or interpret cultural events, research must uncover objective truths (Waymer, 2009). It makes little sense to impose on autoethnographies criteria used to judge

other research methodologies (Sparkes, 2000). Researchers offer 'blind allegiance' to their own pragmatic position and refuse to acknowledge that contributions of other ways of knowing can add to understanding. Methodologies should be judged on criteria consistent with their own internal meaning structures (Sparkes). Autoethnographers argue that findings are true as written in text. Emotional honesty is viewed as a means of establishing researchers' credibility, authority and believability. "Autoethnography, whether conducted in one's own community or somewhere else, therefore inherently means relationship, responsibility, and ethics," (Nancy, as cited in Roth, 2009; n.p.).

Strengths of Autoethnography

Autoethnographic researchers have freedom to be a player in research and mix personal experiences with those studied, moving inquiry into knowledge (Wall, 2006). They address the 'self' including situations which leave the researcher self-conscious through upheavals and conflicts. Being a CMR, autoethnographers have personal reasons to be active in the social world and spend time in the field under study. This involvement assists in data availability, and because of prior knowledge of the cultural language, researchers will have "insider meanings" and share knowing on a deeper, more subtle level (Hayano, 1979). A balance between being an active participant and researcher must be sought so one does not overpower the other (Anderson, 2006).

Proponents of autoethnography value knowledge grounded in hands-on participation with intimate, active, personal connections (Conquergood, 2002). Researchers' subjectivity is seen as a source for understanding the world they are investigating (Holt, 2003). 'Knowing how' and 'knowing who' carry more importance than 'knowing that' and 'knowing about'. They believe knowledge is gained by viewing social cultures from the ground level, and being in the 'thick of

things' (Conquergood, 2002). Epistemologies that link knowing with seeing do not consider unspoken cultural meanings that may be masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded or hidden in context.

Autoethnographic text allows readers to experience research in unique ways. Autoethnographers risking thoughts and feelings provide their audience an opportunity to think and feel, and examine distressing and pressing issues (Berry, 2006). Researchers, after determining their views and the best method to effectively communicate them, consider the impact of disclosing these views to self and others. This discernment provides new opportunities for introducing and experiencing social issues, and challenges researchers to avoid being “static, complacent and myopic” (p. 105).

Method

I never feel that I have comprehended an emotion, or fully lived even the smallest events, until I have reflected upon it in my journal, my pen is my truest confidant, holding in check the passions and disappointments that I dare not share even with my beloved (Barron, 1996, p.2).

Reflection turns experiences into learning. It takes an experience and engages in it to make sense of what has occurred and explores thoughts and emotions around “messy and confused events” (Boud, 2001; p. 10). Reflective thinking is a medium for identifying, analyzing and solving complex problems where the researcher, by using personal past experiences and relevant knowledge, resolves, clarifies or addresses a state of doubt (Spalding & Wilson, 2002). Learning takes into account prior experience and builds on existing perceptions and frameworks of understanding (Boud).

My personal data sources included a typed daily reflective journal, my handwritten journal containing my thoughts through poetry and text, and a daily role/time log that reflected roles I played in various school activities and the time used for each. Data collected from written sources: personal reflective journaling, personal documentation of conversations and meetings, minutes from administration meetings, and daily records of personal time spent on school related activities were themed and cross-referenced using a qualitative computer program, NVivo.

My reflective writing journal was a permanent record of thoughts and experiences (Spalding & Wilson, 2002). It followed Francis's (1995) reflective writing process which involved summarizing key points, discussing my key learnings, addressing questions that emerged from topics, issues, or strategies, and reflected on my personal reactions to context, content or strategies in my writings. I included issues that mattered to me (Delamont, 2009).

Boud's (2001) 'occasions of reflection' gave me opportunity for reflection around when reflection occurs. My personal reflective journals were situated in the past, with reflection occurring after events. Reflective journaling for my autoethnography considered reflection in anticipation of events, in the midst of action and after events (Boud). Reflection in anticipation of events focuses intents and goals the learner brings to the situation, clarifies questions that need addressing and focuses on learning skills and strategies. I thought about upcoming events, but rarely journaled my thoughts. Would journaling prior to events clarify journaling after the events? Reflecting in the midst of action includes noticing, intervening and reflection-in-action. Awareness of what is happening leads to a conscious decision to change or not change situations one is currently in. Throughout this process, focus is on personal thoughts and feelings rather than external activities. Though journaling may be difficult, enough should be recorded to allow the writer information to expand on at a later time.

Reflecting after the event involves thinking, feelings, emotions and decision making. The writer returns to the experience, giving a richly textured account. Though attending to feelings is important, writers must be aware that feelings can inhibit or enhance possibilities for further reflection and learning. Expressive writing such as images, sketches, poems, uses of colour and form can be used (Boud, 2001).

After-event reflection involves re-evaluating the experience, finding shape, pattern and meaning to what has been experienced. The journaling process includes revisiting previous journal writings and adding ideas. 'What sense can I make of this?' and 'Where does it lead me?' are questions that can be answered. Relationships between old and new ideas are made. Determining authenticity of ideas and feelings makes resulting knowledge one's own (Boud, 2001).

In my journals social and political implications were considered through critical reflection, the highest of five levels of reflection according to Valli (1997). As my journal writing moved into critical reflection, it was important to consider the inhibiting gaze of others. The more my writing focused on hesitation, doubt, perplexity, inner discomforts or dilemmas, the greater was my need to consider who was reading the writing (Valli). I was cautious that writing for an external audience did not shape what I wrote or what I allowed myself to consider. Consequences could range from embarrassment to job loss (Boud, 2001). I took the above into consideration when I began daily journaling in November, 2009. Upon completing my journal on July 1, 2010, the end of the current school year, I performed qualitative analysis on my data.

Documentation was a natural process in my job. Using text, I recorded telephone calls, conversations with the school division, parents, students, teachers, and external agencies, and students' academic and behaviour programming. Data collection for my study came from three

sources: two daily reflective personal journals and role/time log. I started the role/time log in September, 2009. It was a personal daily chronicle which indicated, in point form, issues, actions required, whether decisions and actions were in the context of administrator, teacher, or learning resource teacher, and time devoted to the issue.

I began formal reflective journaling in November, 2009. I used my personal journals to daily record incidents, events and activities. Included was a critical reflection of my roles, what I did, why, and how I could improve. Though the majority of my journaling was done on my laptop, less formal writing and more creative thought was handwritten, usually in free verse form, in a separate journal.

This creative writing unintentionally evolved around a statue my husband bought me for Christmas (see Figure 1). An angel is draped over the world. Her face is hidden, yet her body language evokes an abundance of emotions. These emotions, subject to my interpretation, were why I loved the statue. In her I saw sorrow, despair, calmness, contentment, brokenness, and hope. I described my emotional connection to the day by saying, “Today she is....” Themes I saw evolving around her helped me analyze my teaching principal roles. One theme clearly revealing itself, “Today she is broken....,” described my frustrations around meeting expectations and being unheard about student needs.



Figure 1: Angel Statue

Typing in my reflective journal at the end of every school day, I averaged one hour and four pages of writing. A challenging day left me with an hour and a half of writing and 7 pages of documentation and reflection. Journaling extended my daily documentation into reflection. I continued journaling to the last day of school, June 28, 2010.

Analysis and Interpretation

Analysis is a breaking up, separating or disassembling of research materials into pieces, parts, elements, or units. With facts broken down into manageable pieces, the researcher sorts and sifts them, searching for types, classes, sequences, processes, patterns or wholes. The aim of this process is to assemble or reconstruct the data in a meaningful or comprehensible fashion (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 107).

Having an idea about themes before the researcher starts analyzing is not uncommon in autoethnography (Ellis, 2004). Poetry based on the statue did not provide, but supported themes used to construct the analysis. The poems reinforced different themes and reflected my feelings on her, which helped me analyze my roles around those themes.

Thematic analysis is an acceptable method of analysis for autoethnography. This analysis can support essentialist or realist paradigms by reporting on experiences, meanings, and participants' realities. It also supports constructivism, which describes my paradigm, and allowed me to examine how I made sense of events, realities, meanings and experiences being immersed in an exceptionally small rural school (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To determine themes I followed Seidel's (1998) qualitative data analysis (QDA) process. Qualitative data analysis is a cyclical process, where the researcher is constantly noticing, collecting, and thinking about interesting things. Comparing analysis to creating a puzzle, identify a piece of the puzzle is noticing and coding it. Coding involves noticing new things in

data. Though Seidel (1998) described code words as heuristic or objective, or used for either purpose, QDA leans more toward code words as heuristic tools rather than an objective representation of facts. As I read my journals, my code words pointed to interesting things in my data. Heuristic codes helped me reorganize and gave different views of my data. Coding helped in discovering and opening data to intensive analysis and inspection. I read and re-read my journal, looking for interesting pieces. 'Pieces' were coded by giving them descriptive names such as 'parents', 'students', 'process', 'thoughts', and 'use of admin time'.

The second QDA step is to look at all the pieces and put them into groups that are the same. In a puzzle, that might be the sky, the border, or a tree. In QDA, that's phase two, or the collecting process. As similarities within groups were determined, themes emerged.

In the third, or 'thinking about things' QDA step, patterns and relationships in and across the themes were determined. Using Seidel's (1998) idea of making general discoveries around themes, I looked into my data to find responses to my research questions. Using the NVivo computer program, further reducing the data resulted in me identifying three major themes: fractured roles, capacity to meet expectations, and building relationships.

Richardson's (2000) criteria for judging critical analytical practices guided my autoethnography analysis. The criteria included: a) substantive contribution – Does the research contribute to the body of understanding in my social/cultural setting? 2) aesthetic merit - Is the text satisfyingly complex and not boring? 3) reflexivity - Is the author cognizant of epistemological and postmodernism? How has the author gathered information and written the text? Are there ethical question? 4) impactfulness – Is the reader effected emotionally or intellectually? Does it lead to new questions or move the reader into action? and 5) expresses a

reality – Is true, credibly lived experience expressed in the text? I obtained research credibility by peer debriefing with my supervisor who checked and assisted me on my interpretations.

Trustworthiness

Traditional research criteria for trustworthiness which involved validity, reliability and objectivity are not effective for evaluating and interpreting qualitative research (Holt, 2003). Trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry is addressed by establishing rigorous methodology and analysis processes, recognizing rigor through the researcher's narrated experiences, and structuring a formal research report (Lahman et al., 2010), and through explaining research decisions and on what grounds these decisions are made (Ellis, 1999).

Trustworthiness in my research was based on Lahman et al.'s (2010) and Ellis' (1999) criteria. Rigorous methodology involved daily reflexive journaling from November 2009 to June, 2010. Autoethnographic research relies on accuracy of the researcher's recollections to document events (Philaretou & Allen, 2006). Writing daily in my journal helped prevent inaccurate recollections. Trustworthiness around rigor of narrated experiences and a structured formal research report was established through peer debriefing with my supervising professor, Dr. Bonnie Stelmach.

Computer software designed for qualitative data analysis can help ensure accuracy in analysis and results (Westphal, 2000). Analysis should ensure that initial themes are an accurate representation of the researcher's life over the period of time being researched (Philaretou & Allen, 2006). I used the computer program NVivo to help me manage over 300 pages of typed journal data. Going through the data with NVivo, I searched for terms I want, methodically highlighting words. This served to manage the data so I could develop confidence that my three themes had developed careful data consideration.

Timeline

Continual journaling took place between November 1, 2009 and July 1, 2010. Data analysis occurred throughout July and August, 2010. Analyzing written documentation and personal journals, I looked for themes that supported my question of how exceptionally small rural schools affect teaching principals' roles.

Moving Ahead – My Autoethnography

*Today she can rest
Defense is done
Changes to be made*

*Time to move ahead.
Writing will be so
much work
but fun.*

Bringing pieces together

Bringing life

Bringing truth

*Telling my story
Telling my truth*

Making it whole

May 18, 2010

I contemplate autoethnography as my research method choice. My inner debates, struggles and self-doubts leave me wondering if my experiences in autoethnographic form will be considered valid, relevant or true. How will readers think, feel and react? How can I be productive and ensure my thesis is worthy of this research method?

Ellis (2004, 2009) describes autoethnographic writing as truthful, therapeutic, vulnerable, evocative and ethical. I know I'm on the right path. My questions and doubts are answered. Her rich writing gives me a feeling of 'being there'. I am encouraged to write a story that will evoke

responses and open possibilities for dialogue, collaboration and relationships. My challenge is to analyze my past year as a teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school in a way that brings ‘felt’ news from my world, and gives readers a vicarious experience of my life.

I smile and say an inner, “Yes!!” when I read Ellis’ (2009) comment, “My goal then is to produce accessible and evocative literary and analytic texts that are the product of an ethnographer’s eye, a social worker’s heart, and a novelist’s penchant for stirring up emotional response” (p. 14). This resonates with me. Her words describe me – who I am, how I think and view my world. In fact, it is so accurate, it is almost eerie. The ethnographer’s eye connects me to my personal and school culture.

I acknowledge my personal culture, a Ukrainian-Polish female who was raised with an ‘if you’re not working you’re being lazy’ work ethic, and a compassion and empathy for the ‘underdog’. I acknowledge my school community culture, not only an exceptionally small rural school, but one with a strong Mennonite core and a penchant for sponsoring immigrant families. Within this stability, my ethnographic eye sees changes as new family’s unique personal, religious and ethnic cultures challenging the community’s status quo.

Autoethnographers have a social worker’s heart (Ellis, 2009). Would I describe myself in the same way? Absolutely. In fact, if life had taken different turns, I would have gone beyond the social worker’s heart and into the field. Alternately, I bring the heart to my work. I empathize with students’ and families’ struggles and challenges which in turn guides my desire for connection, establishing relationships. Striving to be fair, where all families are heard, their lives matter and I advocate for their children drives my choices and actions as a teaching principal.

I hope my writing creates an emotional response. Why? Schools are emotional. Children are emotional. The mere fact that schools are not buildings, but people, implies an emotional component. Whether readers feel the same about my role as a teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school as me is irrelevant. But feeling *what* I feel does matters. In feeling there is understanding and in understanding there is potential for change.

Reliving my journals wasn't easy. Looking back, I am overwhelmed with the energy I spent being torn in a multitude of directions, fighting to support student needs, building relationships and remaining compliant within the realm of division and Ministry expectations. I am now able to see times where I was more successful than I had imagined. In other instances, I know that all my roles not only challenged but hampered, and perhaps created barriers for allowing me to be and feel as effective as possible. If I am truly honest with myself, this process has also been painful. I have faced fears and self-doubts (Ellis, 2004) around my roles. An overriding pain of self-doubt and a constant uncertainty of whether I was 'good enough' to do this particular job was a constant challenge. That said, mine is not a "victim tale" (Ellis, 2009, p. 17), but a moral and ethical description and analysis of a real life.

My journals were multi-dimensional. Though I began with hand-written documentation and reflection, my writing began to incorporate prose, an old friend that had been in hibernation. The impetus to write prose emanated from an emotional connection to an angel statue (see Figure 1), seeing her in part as an angel of sorrow, hope, strength, grief and peace. I had no intentions of using her in my journaling, but as it took shape, so did my writing; as thoughts, feelings, emotions, and reactions were written through her.

Pen in hand, I re-read my literature review, ready to make notes. I approached this task hesitantly, anxious to connect – hoping to connect – curious to see whether my personal

experiences were similar to or contrary to research on teaching principals in exceptionally small rural schools. I was pleasantly surprised, in fact, I was shocked. Though my personal experiences as a teaching principal parallel much of current research, they are not identical. My experiences added a rich narrative of experiences and reflections to existing literature.

My autoethnography reflects the multi-dimensional aspect of my journal. Within Chapters 5, 6, and 7, three themes – fractured roles, capacity to meet expectations, and building relationships – are discussed. Each chapter begins with a vignette that is not exclusive of my experiences (Ellis, 2009), but depicts actual events I experienced as a teaching principal within the given theme. Following the vignette, I use my poetry and journal excerpts to connect my interpretations and data analysis to research. In addition, poetry expressing emotions and feelings attached to my angel statue will be presented alongside images depicting the statue from various perspectives. The images metaphorically illustrate pieces of me – and suggest that as all sides of the statue must be seen to understand the entire image, so must a teaching principal's role be seen from various perspectives to be thoroughly understood. My vignettes and connections to research are influenced by my documentation, current frames of memory, and what the memories mean to me (Ellis, 2009).

I deliberate over my research questions. Though I know this past year was busy, using personal journals as a research source has given me a more thorough understanding of my job's complexities. Having been immersed in my research as a researcher and participant (du Preez, 2008), I had expected clear, brief and distinct answers to my research questions: How does the context of an exceptionally small, rural school impact upon a teaching principal's role(s)? How do stakeholder expectations (school staff, community, division, Ministry) impact teaching principals' roles and responsibilities in an exceptionally small rural school? and What challenges

and opportunities does a teaching principal face in an exceptionally small rural school? To the contrary, answers were complex and were bridged between questions. The remaining chapters represent not only my research journey, but the pieces of me as a teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school.

...and so my journey continues...

Chapter 4

Fractured Roles: A Fine Balance Or Mélange of Mayhem?

I'm at an admin meeting, thinking about all the things I'm being asked to do as a principal: student leadership, build a staff team, future planning and school goals. Can it be done with all the duties connected to my administrative, teaching and LRT roles?
(May 11, 2010)¹

I'm late. It's one of those days. I left home a bit later than usual, now here I am – stuck at a railway crossing 10 km from work. Powering up my laptop, I use the time to work at our school newsletter. Getting to school later than 8:00 unnerves me – I lose organizing time. Thankfully, I'm not on supervision. That will give me a few minutes to get my head together. At last – the train moves and I'm on my way. I admire the sunrise – a gift that comes with early morning drives.

8:20. Hauling my school bags into my office, I set them down, knowing that any minute bus students will arrive and their voices will fill the building.

“Good morning, Joyce.” I'm startled, hearing the unexpected voice. It comes flooding back. Oh, no! I was to meet our Educational Psychologist at 8:00.

“Linda²! I'm so sorry! I totally forgot! I left home late then got stuck....never mind. Give me a minute and I'll join you.” How could I have forgotten? I've been doing that so much lately – dropping the ball, forgetting what I need to do. Balancing is becoming more and more difficult. I better add ‘check day planner’ to my to-do list. I drop my bags, grab a pen and paper, run across the hall, and sit down, flustered.

¹ All dates indicate documentation dates from my personal journals.

² All names in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are pseudonyms.

Principal and teacher duties with a 9:00 deadline are put aside and in my Learning Resource Teacher (LRT) role, we discuss the day. Linda tries hard, but she's over-worked. She gets here when her schedule allows it, but it's not nearly enough for how often we could use her. Before year end she will have assessed at least five of our 50 students. I'm thankful we have an EdPsync, but I'm the one who contacts parents, ensures that teachers and parents complete referral forms, sends them to our student services coordinator, organizes follow-up meetings, and ensures that teachers implement recommendations. These five assessments added to the other 17 assessed students, means almost half our students receive EdPsync, Speech Language or school counselor support. I know more work will fall on my shoulders: more planning, more parent meetings, a stronger LRT role and limited time for me to do it.

I struggle again with my multiple roles and what it means to me, parents and students. Staff cuts have not allowed for a sustained teacher – admin – LRT team. The previous LRT and I were an effective team who shared ideas, tag teamed with students, helped each other through difficult situations with students or parents, and supported each other in our unique roles. I am now two roles in one person. There are so many pieces required to be me.

"O.K., Linda – what are we doing today?"

"I need to test Larry and figure out what's going on with that little boy. Some things aren't adding up."

"I agree. His classroom teacher says he's disconnected from his classroom and play environment. I met with his mom, and she says he hates school. None of our strategies are working. It will be good to get a grasp on this. What else can we get done today?"

"Is Tom still available after school?"

"He sure is."

“Then we need to meet and determine what we can put into place to get our boys working. They can’t continue sitting in their desks refusing to work. A Response to Intervention plan will give us direction. Tom may need support because it’s new to him, but this has to happen.”

“I agree,” I say, thinking, “Where will I find time for this?” but it needs to get done.

The 9:00 bell rings and once again my students start the day without me. I walk in and thank April for supervising and getting things started. Covering for me isn’t part of her secretary or librarian role, but our school is small enough for staff to see easily identify and respond to other’s needs. I really dislike days where I don’t have time to switch on my teacher brain. I quickly whip off the admin/LRT hat, hang it at the door and don my teacher hat. Checking day planners, I quietly greet my students.

Today my teaching priority is finishing Fountas and Pinnell reading comprehension assessments. Our school division has hired SELU (Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit) to lead principals in three instructional leadership days. Tomorrow we follow-up with setting reading goals and I need to bring testing results. The other three teachers have given me theirs. I’m the only one not done.

For three days I’ve organized in-class group projects and self-directed computer projects to give me time, but students needed more support than I had expected. To their excitement, we literally gave the class a quarter turn, providing me space in the back of the classroom to simultaneously conduct assessments and supervise. Bringing in a substitute teacher to give my students more consistency and provide me the opportunity to focus on assessments wasn’t an option. I’m left with ‘being creative’. (Twice this year I called a sub for a sick day, then used them to spell off other teachers. I wonder why I don’t give myself the same option?)

Making a decision contrary to everything I believe, but knowing I've run out of time and options, I bring in a movie that will babysit while I complete the assessments. My students are thrilled. I cringe because this isn't how I teach, but it is how I will survive this one time. They think this is recognition for receiving an excellence virtue. I don't correct them.

The movie won't work on our new laptop. Our poor techies – I wouldn't be surprised if they grimace every time they hear my voice or see another e-mail with the heading 'Joyce needs help – again'. I consider myself relatively adept at using technology, but these new laptops have me stymied. (I know I should have it set up and ready before school starts – that's what all good teachers do, isn't it? My job isn't compartmentalized enough for that to happen.) I continue to try and make it work. My students' patience is wearing thin. I switch laptops, and voila! A mere 25 minutes later and we're ready to go.

Conducting assessments in the library, I leave my class. I'm across the hall, within earshot so indirectly supervise. Ten thirty rolls around too soon. It's recess and I haven't finished. I walk back to class.

"Show me you're ready for recess." I smile, remembering Constable MacIntyre's reaction watching students quickly remove their shoes, put them under their desk, ensure their books are put away and give me eye contact. I wonder if he thought it was a bit military, but taking less than 30 seconds, it's a great transition from work to play.

After reminding my students to choose a healthy snack, I look for Kara. She knows I'm finishing assessments and has offered to help.

"Kara, how much trouble is it for you to keep Anne today? I can get done if I don't have Math. If it doesn't work for you, she can finish watching the movie with my class." Anne, a gifted Math student, takes Math with a higher grade.

“No problem. I can have her work at something with my grade.”

“Are you sure? I haven’t given you much notice.”

“No problem. Get your work done. There’s a lot she can do here.”

“Excellent. Thanks! Talk to you later. I have to get ready for my next assessment.”

I’m constantly grateful for this staffs’ ability to support each other. This balances the days I feel resentful, feeling as though I do everything and have to ask and ask again for feedback, newsletter items, and month-end forms. At times I am frustrated with the energy it takes to keep people motivated, but this staff will always support and back each other through difficult situations.

The recess bell rings. This time, I get into class before the students and wait as they enter. I listen to their chatter. As usual, most conversations involve the tetherball – a constant joy and source of frustration. Seeing me, they quickly settle into their desks.

“Can we watch the rest of the movie?”

“Would you be really upset if we watch it in Math class so I can finish?” I know what the response will be, but it’s fun playing the game.

“No! It’s O.K.! You can take all the time you want!!”

I smile, start the movie again, and complete everyone’s assessment by 11:45. Whew! Not a minute to spare. I return to my classroom, turn off the movie and wait for Kara and her grade 4 class to arrive. Within minutes I hear feet rumbling as students transition from downstairs to upstairs.

“Grade 5 and 6, Mrs. Lane is here. Please give her eye contact and say, ‘Good morning, Mrs. Lane, we’re so glad you’re here today.’”

“Good morning, Mrs. Lane, we’re so glad you’re here today.” It’s a standing joke – finding ways to transition from me to their other teacher. They are ready.

I rarely get out of class on time. With transition time, it’s not uncommon for me to lose five to fifteen minutes from this half hour block of admin time – or is it LRT time? My job consists of three roles which, according to formula, total a 1.529 position. It has not been possible to compartmentalize my roles.

“Joyce, Kelsey is on the phone for you.” Drats! I had forgotten to return this call. All schools in the division have undergone a playground assessment and Kelsey, superintendent of facilities and transportation, wants to discuss it. Thankfully, she is using some of her lunch hour to do this. Mine starts at 12:15, which leaves me 10 minutes before I’m on lunch supervision.

Twenty five minutes later, we finalize needed changes to the playground and discuss what to include in a maintenance request. I had read the entire report, but had no idea what to do with it, so this is helpful. I’ve missed my lunch supervision. Thankfully, Tom stepped in. I have a few minutes to send my SCC chair an update. We’ve shared many e-mails wondering how playground equipment not meeting safety codes will be repaired. We have an answer!

Karen walks into my office. She’s a light in my day and not only helps me strategize around parent and student needs, but takes time to listen to my concerns.

“Hi, Karen. How’s your day going?”

“Good enough. And you?” Since neither of us has had lunch we use this time to catch up and eat.

“I’m O.K., but I’m having so much trouble balancing this year.”

“So, why don’t you give some jobs to others on staff?”

“I don’t know how. I’m not only responsible for so many roles, but too busy to think of what to give up. They already have a full plate – how do I justify adding to it?”

The bell rings, ending lunch hour. Sounds of students going up and downstairs, their excitement about intramurals or the shoe stuck in the tree after it ‘accidentally got kicked up there’ fills the hallways. Karen regularly sees five students and advises me on at least another five.....such a high number for a school with 50 students.

As students settle into class, she moves downstairs to Kara’s empty classroom. Linda is using the resource room, our only available private space. This upper- level room, formerly the staff room, mirrors mine and is used by EAs, Karen, Linda, and our Speech Language Therapist as our ‘extra’ space. I need to balance working with Karen and Linda. Karen and I will meet with parents before the day is over, then Linda and I will meet with Tom after school. Whew! There’s so much to do before the day is over.

In the meantime – time to get caught up with admin work. I open an e-mail from the division requesting we submit a purchase order for new grade 8 Science curriculum resources. I once again feel a sense of dismay, noting the cost, concerned with diminishing funds from our decentralized budget. Small schools get ‘doubly hit’ with expenses. Our budget has not been increased to accommodate expenses associated with the new curriculum. Having multigrade classrooms, we purchase textbooks for more than the designated grade. We’re quickly running out of money.

Karen finds me to see if I’m ready for the meeting. Good news! Mom and dad are at the meeting about their daughter. Dad is here for the first time. Today he’s able to acknowledge and deal with their daughter’s need for attention, inappropriate methods of gaining attention and how it’s getting in the way of classmates wanting to be with her. Karen is amazing. I learn

so much about leading a meeting, using ‘parent and student friendly’ language, and being gently upfront. Karen asks our student to stand on a chair. We give her a standing ovation for what she’s been doing well, and Karen asks, “So, how does it feel to be the centre of attention?” The reply: “kind of good and kind of bad.” Karen has her hooked. Pretty cool.

Amidst my watching and learning, I realize I am wearing all three hats: classroom teacher, administrator and LRT. This is so wrong on so many levels: for myself, parents and students. If parents have a concern, it’s impossible to follow our protocol of speaking first to the teacher, LRT, then the principal. The only option available is to speak with the teacher then superintendent. It’s also wrong for the student. If they don’t believe I’m advocating for them, or wish to speak to an adult other than their classroom teacher, they can’t speak with the principal or LRT. It isn’t fair to them or me.

The bell rings and I excuse myself. I’m on bus supervision. Some days I don’t get out as quickly as I should, but today I’m on time. Good thing. As I step outside, I see Barry walk away from the bus after talking to Cory, his brother already on the bus.

“Barry, what’s up?”

“I’m going with Lance.”

“Do you have permission from mom not to be on the bus?”

“No, but I told Cory to tell her.”

“Sorry, Barry, but unless the school has a note or call from mom saying you can stay in town, we assume she expects you home, so you have to be on the bus. Remember? We’ve talked about this, and you can’t make last minute arrangements or stay in town without mom knowing about it. I’ll talk to mom and tell her I talked to you about this, O.K.?”

Barry is not happy, and begrudgingly goes on the bus. I immediately go to my office and e-mail his mom, a daily routine. Today, I share events around Barry, and inform her that because of a meeting I didn't check Cory's homework or ensure he has everything with him. Cory and I meet every day to touch base, check homework, and talk about the day. He's not working to grade level and struggles with being in school. He takes pleasure in playing 'why I didn't get my homework done' games between his parents and the school. Numerous meetings with the division team – school counselor, student services coordinator, EdPsync, classroom teacher, LRT and administrator (both me), and parents – define and establish expectations and routines to support Cory's academic and social needs. Daily contact with parents helps to maintain these expectations and routines. Thank goodness mom supports our efforts.

I've kept Linda waiting. She, Tom and I meet until 4:45. Plans are in place. My challenge will be follow-up: checking in with Tom and sharing our conversation with the boys' EA to ensure the RTI is consistently implemented and documented.

In my office at 5:00, I admonish myself for doing what is quick and easy rather than what I need to accomplish before I leave. Prep – get it done. Arrrg!! How can I connect my subs' lesson plans to what I've been doing when I haven't formally taught for three days? There has been no consistency in my classroom. My students have been great – working hard and completing tasks, but I haven't been there to respond, support, assess or follow through with what they've been doing.

Knowing I'll be getting home late again, I call my husband.

"Hi, John. It's going to be a while before I get home."

"What is it this time?"

"I have to prep and I'm having a hard time planning. I'll be a couple hours."

“What do you want for supper?”

“I don’t know. Make something for yourself. I’ll figure it out when I get home.”

“Call me before you leave.”

I plan a lesson that follows the curriculum but is unrelated to anything I had been trying to accomplish. I plan what I hope is a dynamic ELA comprehension assignment, and equivalent fractions in Math. Hopefully it will go well. When I return, my follow up will include a reflection assignment with guiding statements ‘before we started yesterday, I already knew’, ‘something I knew but had forgotten’, and ‘something I learned that was new.’ It’s easier for me and the sub. I don’t expect it’s easy for my students. I feel I’ve organized the day well enough and get ready to leave. Fountas and Pinnell!! I’m not ready for tomorrow’s meeting.

“Hi, John. I forgot organized my assessments. I can finish at home or school.”

“You might as well get it done. How long will you be?”

“At least another hour.” These calls are always difficult. Once again demands associated with my roles take precedence over my home life. I feel more married to the school than my husband. I’m so fortunate he accepts the job’s demands on my time, but it still leaves me feeling guilty. The clock reads 9:15.

Shortly after 10:00, I choose to go home. I haven’t completed my work to the level I expected, but it’s late enough. I’m thankful the days are getting longer. Driving home, I relive my day, thinking about everything I tried to balance. It doesn’t surprise me that I have trouble staying on top of things. I know I should adhere to the ‘touch it once’ strategy recommended at our SELU workshop, but that’s only possible when I’m not torn in so many directions, with so many roles. I quickly drop onto my desk whatever is in my hands and move on to the next demand and role. I’ve learned to put my teaching books (and hat) on my desk, don my LRT hat

to meet with the school counselor or educational psychologist, and as quickly switch back to my admin hat, supporting school staff and respond to division requests. Let's be realistic. Some days I don't know which hat I'm wearing, I just do what needs to get done. I'm home by 11:00.

Connecting: Fractured Roles



Figure 2: Fractured

Her standing joke:

"Let me check with the classroom teacher."

"Oh, that's me."

"Admin should be able to help with that."

"Oh, yeah, that's me, too."

"Let's see if we can get LRT support with that."

"Drats – still me."

Me, myself and I takes on a whole new meaning.

No one is an island?

She thinks not.

January 16, 2010

Re-reading my journals to discover themes, I looked for surprises. I searched for an unexpected theme, a reason or explanation I had not considered (Ellis, 2004). My writing reflected and reinforces what I knew and lived. Principal, teacher, and learning resource teacher (LRT) roles left me overwhelmed, attempting to balance each role, trying to give each role enough time to feel I was managing "good enough" (C. Ruys, personal communication, January 11, 2010).

Though the theme, fractured roles, arising from my research is not a surprise, I am surprised with the intense time and personal energy I expended trying to feel successful in each role. Struggles around being pulled apart or fractured left me questioning my effectiveness as principal, teaching or LRT.

Autoethnography is dangerous (Ellis, 2004) in that it gives me permission to confront “less than flattering” (Ellis, p. 230) parts of me. The me I know – a strong, fiercely independent woman who sets high personal standards– is not the person I see reflected in my journals. I am confronted with a person experiencing self-doubts and emotional pain (Ellis). I see me struggling, frustrated, and disheartened, questioning my capability as a teacher and principal (February 8; January 11; June 4, 2010). I felt “*sad and overwhelmed, trying to talk myself into being O.K., but torn in so many directions all the time*” (January 21, 2010), “*struggling with the roles I need to play and the time it takes to do a decent job*” (February 11, 2010). Though seeing this side of me is painful, it is a true reflection of the life I lived (Ellis) as an LRT and teaching principal.

Autoethnography gives me voice for a moral and ethical conversation around fractured roles and living well within my job context (Ellis, 2009). Connecting my fractured role experiences to research addressing role duality provides answers to my research questions, How does the context of an exceptionally small, rural school impact upon a teaching principal's role(s)? and What challenges and opportunities does a teaching principal face in an exceptionally small rural school?

Fractured Roles

Fractured roles, a theme constructed from analyzing my research, connects to current research addressing “role duality”, a combined principal and teaching role, (Dunning, 1993; Starr

& White, 2008; Wilson, 2009), and the balance associated with meeting expectations associated with these roles (Dowling, 2009). Research connects role duality to small schools (Dunning) and supports my experiences. I add to research by discussing issues around role duality unique to exceptionally small rural schools. Using the term ‘fractured roles’ I expand research on “role duality” to a more complex role that includes an LRT component and more thoroughly describes the nature of a teaching principal’s role.

Answers to my research questions are delimited to roles I experienced as a teaching principal. The name itself implies two primary roles – principal and teacher. Though experiencing staff cuts, we were required to maintain an LRT position. With no trained LRT on staff and wanting to ensure teachers did not experience an increase in class size, I adopted the LRT position as my third role. Our staff decision coincides with research indicating that principals adopt a teaching role to ease teachers’ workloads (Dunning, 1993).

I became aware of secondary roles associated with my position. Sitting by at my angel statue one evening, I wrote,

*How will she balance
teacher
principal
learning resource teacher
instructional leader
SLC teacher mentor
manager
psychologist
counselor
mentor
team builder
listener
motivator
parent
guide?*

April 28, 2010

Seeing this list helped me recognize roles I associated with my job. I do not suggest I was qualified for all these roles, but acknowledge that I stepped into them at various times, to varying degrees and for a variety of reasons. Though not exclusive, this list provides evidence of fractured roles as an overlying theme. My experiences paralleled research with balancing and prioritizing time needed to accomplish all tasks associated with my roles (Dowling, 2009). I struggled with being effective and efficient in my job. Comments from my journal: *“I feel torn in so many directions all the time”* (January 21, 2010), *“I continue to struggle with all the roles I need to play and the time it takes”* (February 11, 2010), *“I’m balancing too much and can’t take in everything, so am starting to pick and choose”* (March 3, 2010), and *“I’m planning so much as LRT I don’t have time for my own classroom prep”* (March 10, 2010) reinforce challenges I experienced balancing the various roles.

Though I tried to balance them, my roles did not receive equal or adequate time. *“I’m so far behind in corrections, it’s terrifying. I feel as though I’m just not on top of it and am doing things on an ‘as needed’ basis”* (May 25, 2010). Sharing concerns with my area superintendent, he acknowledged that the three roles, a 1.529 position, explained my 12 hour work days. We did not arrive at a solution to help me manage the roles.

Donald Sutherland, in a television interview, used a First Nation’s story to discuss the concept of a person’s inner duality. An elder told his grandson about two wolves living inside each person, one struggling for evil and the other for good. When the grandchild asked which wolf wins, the elder replied, “The one you feed!” The same held true for my roles – a continuous push-pull to determine which role would be fed. I found this lack of freedom in balancing teaching and administrative duties frustrating (Dunning, 1993). My experience did not align with research indicating that a principal’s commitment to teaching detracts from

administrative duties (Dunning). *“I’m almost surprised I got through the day...I was pulled so many ways, and had to make so many accommodations – to the detriment of my teaching”*

(February 12, 2010). Demands from other roles often took priority over my teaching role.

One of my greatest challenges this year was feeling ineffective in my roles. I was *“overwhelmed to the point where I was subconsciously picking and choosing what I’d remember”* (July 6, 2010) and was *“wearing out, trying to do three jobs in one”* (January 19, 2010). I would spin, wondering where to start. I attempted to first approach what I deemed most important then move on to less pressing tasks. Some jobs did not get done, or were completed late (January 18, 2010). My secretary would remind me of time-dated tasks, but my priorities often over-ruled hers (January 21, 2010). Responsibility for the LRT position added to my feelings of being ineffective. *“I continue to feel completely out of my league. I’m planning programs for students I never see and an EA (educational assistant) implements”* (January 4, 2010). I constantly felt there was ‘nothing right’ about my roles.

My research included a daily ‘what I do’ log where an action, role required, and time performing the action were listed. November 3 documentation revealed 349 minutes devoted to my three roles. Not included was 150 teaching minutes. My day started at 7:00 am with a parent calling to check whether her daughter, in light of the H1N1 flu, should attend school if she was not feeling well and concluded at 8:30 pm after a 90 minute School Community Council (SCC) meeting. Within these three roles I had contact with school division personnel, four parents, five students about a lesson I taught, another five regarding behaviour issues, three staff, a substitute teacher, and my SCC chairperson. All this happened the day I chose not to attend a division workshop associated with the new math curriculum.

The issue of role conflict, interruptions that prevent teaching principals from performing their duties (Hunt, 2000), arises within the context of balancing fractured roles. Research around role duality tends to focus on how a principal's role is impacted (Murdock & Schiller, 2002; Starr & White, 2008). Limited research discusses the teaching component, where teaching principals in small schools have more teaching time and larger grade combinations than counterparts in larger schools (Starr & White, 2008; Wilson & Brundrett, 2009). My research parallels the literature. Fifty percent of my school day was spent teaching a double grade. Interruptions associated with teacher, principal and LRT role conflict could affect my 50% teaching time. Though they guard teaching time, teaching principals may be drawn away by immediate small crises, unexpected visitors, or phone calls (Dunning, 1993). Personal experiences that parallel research included working with division technical support due to our secretary's absence (March 26, 2010), greeting our member of parliament and my parent-in-laws who 'just popped in' (January 4, 2010), and taking phone calls requiring immediate attention (June 10, 2010).

A student's behaviour toward an E.A. forced me to leave my classroom and teaching role to assume the LRT role. Another day, after students displayed inappropriate behaviour toward a substitute teacher, I switched places with her. Having to plan lessons, though I was in school, created more work for me. Administratively I made a good decision, but once again was not in my classroom. Commenting on the how my absences impacted my students, I wrote, "*They've really missed out on me this year*" (June 2, 2010).

Fractured roles did not only occur when LRT and principal roles demanded teaching time. Not discussed in research were teacher-based duties that pull teaching principals away from administrative and LRT roles. Our Student Leadership Council (SLC) sponsored four

separate pizza-lunch activities. As SLC teacher advisor, driving 10 kilometers to pick up pizza was not possible in my teaching role (June 18, 2010). Using administration time was my only option (June 21, 2010). Responding to administrative time loss, I wrote, *“it’s all fun, but I used admin time, or maybe it was my LRT co-teaching time?!?”* Track and field activities, winter carnival, school assemblies, proofreading and organizing the school yearbook, conducting our school choir at a near-by nursing home and practicing for our Christmas concert (December 7, 2010) took me away from administrative duties.

My documentation and experience echoes research around difficulties associated with lack of time (Grady, 1990; Hunt, 2000) and demands that necessitate dealing with administrative matters outside of school hours. Three out-of-school principal meetings, three in-school LRT meetings, one in-school staff meeting, planning for a substitute teacher, and medical day consumed my administration time between Monday, April 19 and Thursday, April 27 *“so for nearly two weeks I’ve had no admin time for the entire afternoon...small wonder I’m behind”* (April 29, 2010). Managerial duties not met during administration time were accomplished after school (Pietsch & Williamson, 2008; Webb & Vulliamy, 1996). *“Admin time just happens when I can sneak it in,”* (January 5, 2010). Journal documentation that I *“got to school around 8:00 and left shortly after 10:00 pm”* (May 14, 2010) and *“left for school at 7:25 and got home at 10:30”* (May 31, 2010) provides examples of long work days due to lack of time during regular school hours.

Role conflict in balancing preparation time in my teaching and LRT roles was a constant challenge. Preparing for classes as a teacher and LRT took equal time and energy. As LRT, *“I’m planning so much I don’t have time for my own classroom prep. Last night I spent an hour and a half (on LRT prep) – today a half hour copying and talking to the EA”*. I felt as though my

grade 5/6 class was getting *“the short end of the stick”*, where my teaching lacked creativity and was in *“survival mode”* (March 10, 2010).

Rather than having designated LRT and administration time, I fulfilled duties associated with both roles during the same time period. Role conflict occurred with meeting demands associated both roles, a 1.029 full time equivalent (FTE) position, as a 0.54 FTE position. *“I thought I’d have admin time at 11:45 but Janice came in and talked about Paul and Sarah for that half hour. I guess it was LRT time, hmm?”* (December 10, 2009). My LRT roles were used on an ‘as needed’ basis for student programming, *“I designed a calculator skills program because he surprisingly has limited technology skills – a bit of a surprise for a boy his age”* (January 5, 2010), meetings with our educational psychologist, speech language pathologist, school counselor, teachers, and parents, phone calls, letters and Ministry paper work.

Fractured roles as blended roles, performing tasks associated with various roles during the same time period, are not discussed in research. My SLC teacher advisor and LRT roles fought for attention *“as I was racing around filling a coffee urn to get hot chocolate ready for our sale, I was also filling Bernice in about the upcoming meeting”* (February 12, 2010). My fractured behaviour was also apparent when, *“I put my math class in the computer lab to practice multiplying 2 digit numbers, and had my (LRT) meeting with the boys and their EA”* (February 12, 2010). Bernice, an EA, provided two students math support during my teaching time. Her work day and my teaching time finished at 11:45. Dealing with an urgent issue involving her students could not wait until I finished teaching.

Blended roles occurred the day I taught until 11:45 and had to complete, before 3:30, student scripts for a school-community program. My superintendent arrived for teacher interviews scheduled from 12:00 – 4:30. I explained my predicament and time frame. He *“was*

great. We completed 2 interviews, then had a half hour break. I quickly got the script done, asked (the school secretary) to copy and give it to the appropriate students, then we continued with interviews” (May 5, 2010). I was principal and teacher, performing duties simultaneously.

Fractured roles demanding a blended component occurred at meetings (Grady, 1990) and other tasks where one or both roles were required. Replying to an e-mail from my student services coordinator who requested a meeting with the principal and LRT, I replied, *“I’ll make sure it works for the LRT and principal. Oh yeah, I’ve talked to myself and I’m O.K. with it!”* (January 16, 2010). In a similar e-mail I replied, as a teacher, to a request for field testing the Ministry’s grade 6 Assessment for Learning questionnaire by saying, *“I teach the subject, can give up one class to administer it, and have the principal’s approval!”* (January 20, 2010).

Meetings with parents and student support services occurred during my afternoon administration time. Calling a child psychiatrist (May 13, 2010) or parent about supports for their child (April 28; May 19, 2010) and working with the educational psychologist, school counselor or speech language pathologist (January 18, 2010; December 1 & 8, 2009) I represented at least two roles. My primary role was LRT, my principal role was also required, and in fewer instances, I represented myself as classroom teacher as well (February 5, 2010).

The concept of fractured roles took on new significance. Not only did my job consist of fractured roles, but the roles themselves consisted of fractured components. As my job was defined by fractured roles, so was my administrative role.

Fractured Roles within the Principalship

Research indicating that, “it is a grave mistake to imagine that there is less administration in a small school than in a large one” (Wilson & Brundrett, 2005, p. 45) not only supports my

experience, but is a great relief to me. It helps me understand my thoughts, realizing that perhaps the ‘problem’ wasn’t me, but the roles I was trying to manage.

Time to say it for what it is...

Yes, it’s busy

Yes, it’s hectic

Yes, it’s more work than I ever thought it would be

Yes, I’m overwhelmed

January 19, 2010

Loss of time played a significant factor in my ability to successfully fulfill timetabled administrative responsibilities. Between November and April I attended 51 meetings with our school counselor, educational psychologist, speech-language pathologist or student services coordinator. Meetings were primarily held during my administration time. Those 51 meetings added to eight in-school staff professional development meetings; 21 absent days for out-of-school principal, teacher and LRT meetings; 13 professional development, earned days off and medical days; and 16 afternoons with scheduled school-based activities such as assemblies, school trips and guest speakers, totaled 109 of 191 afternoons I was not in my office for regular administrative duties. Had I attended all out-of-school meetings, I would have been absent from school and my principal and LRT roles for 61.83% of the school year.

Research around role duality suggests that principals’ duties fall into two categories: management (Dowling, 2009; Hunt, 2000) and instructional leadership (Starr & White, 2008; Wilson & McPake, 2000). Personal experiences that parallel managerial responsibilities outlined in research include managing resources, professional development, finance, teacher workloads, custodial issues resulting from a part-time employed custodian, ordering supplies, balancing budgets, and completing surveys, principal reports and newsletters. Day-to-day managerial issues documented in my ‘what I do’ log were tasks requiring immediate, though brief attention. Time spent on these tasks compared to student issues was miniscule. Table 1 represents a page

from my diary. Though it shows more than administrative roles, time spent on small managerial tasks compared to student needs is clearly indicated.

| Table 1 | | |
|---|-----------|-----------|
| <i>Time spent on teacher, principal and LRT roles, January 28, 2010</i> | | |
| Action | Role | Time |
| Called parent re: March 10 meeting with counselor | LRT | 5 minutes |
| E-mailed counselor | Admin/LRT | 5 minutes |
| SLC meeting | Teacher | 20 min |
| Talked to secretary about skating fees not paid | Admin | 5 min |
| Talked to teacher about skating fees | Admin | 5 min |
| Parent note home for drivers to neighbouring town | Admin | 10 min |
| Asked teacher to reset student's password | Teacher | 2 min |
| Submitted work order for light fixture | Teacher | 5 min |
| Spent time with student; 20 min before recess, 30 after | Admin | 50 min |
| Talked to teacher about my time with student | Admin | 20 min |
| E-mailed parent – child threw out lunch, homework update | Admin | 10 min |
| Worked with student getting homework ready | Admin | 10 min |
| Talked to EA about calling parent to send sick child home | Admin | 5 min |
| Completed EdPsync, SLP referral form for a student | LRT/Admin | 20 min |

Responding to and supporting student behaviour needs, a managerial issue that demanded a significant amount of my administration time, is not discussed in literature as a component of role duality. Eight of fifty students required daily contact to assist in developing and maintaining

positive behaviour and social skills. Lack of time and responding to managerial demands around student behaviour needs left me little opportunity for instructional leadership.

My research supports current literature associated with two components of instructional leadership: creating positive community relationships (Bryant, 2007; Martin & Yin, 1999, Ralph, 20030) and instructional leadership (Chance & Lindgren, 1989; Meyer & Meyer, 2001; Wilson & McPake, 2000). Leadership and building community relationships will be discussed in Chapter 6 which focuses on expectations.

Research suggesting that little time remains for instructional leadership after management issues are addressed (Chance & Lindgren, 1989; Starr & White, 2008; Wilson & Brundrett, 2005) resonates with me, and helps me understand concerns and frustrations around not ‘doing my job’. *“I’m dropping the ball...and continue to struggle with not feeling as though I’m doing my job well”* (February 8, 2010). Challenged to choose between spending time on management or instructional leadership, I questioned, *“Do I have to choose? Do principals from small schools have an option?”* (February 2, 2010).

Instructional leadership time spent connecting with and supporting teachers in new curricula and student learning (Chance & Lindgren, 1989; Dunning, 1993; Starr & White, 2008) was limited. I supported a beginning teacher by helping her develop multigrade teaching skills and providing research resources and websites. Other than a quick ‘walk-by’, I spent no time in her classroom. I struggled with her classroom management, where students, upon completing their work, played non-curricular games. *“I need to find a way to ask her what was happening and why she didn’t have something else planned”* (June 7, 2010). Administrative and LRT demands did not leave me time to follow through with my concerns.

Supporting teachers in new curricula implementation evolved from my fractured role. Teaching principals having curriculum and instructional leadership credibility (Wilson & McPake, 2000) was evident in my supporting role with school math and English Language Arts school SMART goals. Teaching both subjects helped me understand literacy goals, the new math curriculum, and apply First Steps in Math. I identified with teachers' successes and challenges, suggesting that we "*re-make our reading and math goals... (we are) doing really well with reading – not so great with Math – but we're moving ahead*" (April 26, 2010). They knew the 'we' included 'me', and once we agreed upon an action, my teaching and principal roles would actively participate in achieving set goals.

Reflections on my perceived effectiveness in my principal's role revealed that:

Most of what I do is either reactive or attend meetings. Future planning doesn't get done until it needs to get done or when I'm reminded by an e-mail from head office or one of the superintendents. I would love to do more conscious, well thought out future planning, but if it's not immediate, it gets delayed until it is immediate. I find that frustrating. I wish I could write newsletter items as they come up rather than panic at the last minute, seriously look at revising our Learning Improvement Plan, or revisit our SMART goals.
(April 30, 2010)

In addition to challenges associated with fractured roles, I also experienced opportunities. Through fractured roles I was able to 'see the big picture' and have information about situations and circumstances I might not otherwise have been privy to. The same was true for my LRT role. I had more direct contact with parents and outside agencies, where, "*As LRT, I called Dr. X to see when he's available for a phone conversation with (a parent). I tried to call, but the parent wasn't home. We have to get to the bottom of why this report was so inaccurate*"

(January 4, 2010). The opportunity to learn LRT skills and gain a greater appreciation of the LRT role was an opportunity I had not expected. *“The biggest thing that happened was that Karen came in and helped with a BRR for him. It took about an hour and a half, but we put together an amazing (in my opinion) document”* (June 8, 2010).

Opportunities did not override struggles and challenges associated with my LRT-teaching principal role. Fractured roles, blended roles and role conflict led to my year feeling disjointed and fragmented. Personal growth and skill development was overshadowed with frustration and uncertainty.

Conclusion

My experience with fractured roles did not provide me the opportunity for personal reflection. Personal journals and autoethnographic writing put into language what I intuitively felt. Research focusing on role duality, roles experienced by teaching principals struck a chord with me. Reading the literature, I felt as though I had ‘come home’, and felt comforted that other teaching principals had similar experiences. The term ‘fractured roles’ arising from a peer debriefing conversation resonated with me. I had been emulating Dunning’s (1993) term, ‘role duality’, when I realized my experiences were much more complex. I was more than a teaching principal. I was an LRT-teaching principal. My exceptionally small rural school context is the factor that fractured my job into three distinct roles, leaving me responsible for a 1.529 position in a 1.0 full time equivalent job.

My research confirmed complexities, challenges and personal struggles associated with the roles. Balancing LRT, teacher and principal roles was a constant struggle. I gave up trying to determine ‘who I was’ and moved forward to complete the task. Role conflict associated with fractured roles was evident as each role took priority over the others. Whether engaged in a

learning resource teacher, classroom teacher, principal managerial or principal instructional leadership role, I felt guilty that the other roles were not receiving time required for me to capably accomplish tasks associated with my roles.

My reaction to experiencing fractured roles can be summarized in the following poem written April 27, 2010. It was 11:00 pm. I closed my book, my correcting finished for the night. I looked at my angel statue, picked up my pen and wrote:

*She is overwhelmed
It's too much –
more than she can
handle
in too little time.*

*She is not all knowing
yet feels pressure to know all.*

*It's her job
but she doesn't know how to do it.*

*She tries – oh – how hard
she tries.*

*The knot gets bigger –
harder – and threatens to overwhelm her
consume her
obliterate her.*

*She does everything she can to push it down.
suppress it.
ignore it.*

“Just do your best.”

But it's never enough.

There's always more.

overwhelmed

Chapter 5

Capacity to Meet Expectations: “A Different Fish in a Sea of Sameness³”

“Am I expected to ‘follow the piper’ without questioning where we’re going, why we’re going there and what will happen when we get there?” (April 20, 2010)

It’s 8:00 a.m. and I’m off to a meeting. As much as I enjoy driving, I’m looking forward to spring when I can drive during the day. Because I leave later, today feels better. I watch an amazing sunrise and decide I have time. Stopping the car, I reach for my camera, always close at hand, and frame a few pictures. Taking time to appreciate beauty during my 50 minute trip helps balance my life. Another day gone from school and away from my class...it’s been too many this year. Today will challenge me. It won’t be easy.

This will be a day of self-reflection and questions, a day of frustrations and struggle, a day of wondering how to be heard and trying to feel as though I belong, and a day to think about whether my philosophies as a teacher and principal of an exceptionally small school fit within expectations from school division and Saskatchewan’s education system. Division and Ministry expectations are changing in ways that don’t accommodate small schools and small staffs. Implementing new initiatives within current processes is a challenge. Theories presented at workshops and in-services don’t necessarily adapt well to our school setting. Questioning and challenging protocol is a scary. Why don’t I just do what I’m told and not question?

“Oh, come on, Joyce!” I imagine my friend and colleague, Debbie, admonishing me. “Who are you kidding? It’s who you are. You question, push limits. You rarely do anything without asking why and determining how you fit a situation or it fits you.” I also hear Racquel laughing, “You always play devils’ advocate!”

³ Wright, 2007, p.4

I sigh. It would be so much easier if I accepted everything administrators, teachers or LRTs are told, if it wasn't in my nature to contemplate why an initiative or expectation isn't working as effectively as it could be, and how, with increased flexibility from the division or Ministry around process, our school, staff, and my roles would be so much more effective.

I arrive at the meeting. Administrators are re-connecting, bantering, getting their morning coffee. Finding a spot near two female administrators and friends, I set down my books. We don't get enough face-to-face time, so I welcome the opportunity.

The meeting starts with our Director of Education informing us of an upcoming Safe and Caring School survey. Through contact with staff, parents and students principals are expected to play a role in ensuring its successful implementation. He asks us to let him know if it's "not easy to handle" (April 20, 2010). My head fills with questions. "Why now?" "How do we know we need this?" and "How is this different from the Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit (SELU) survey completed three years ago?" He also shares that administrators will be asked to complete 360⁰ surveys on him and superintendents.

I try to embrace information being presented, but feel overwhelmed. Increased expectations have arisen from new initiatives associated with school division amalgamations. Seventy new division and ministry initiatives contradict a division suggestion that principals control their workload by only adopting initiatives that fit our school division's strategic plan.

I take a deep breath, awaiting our presenters. Today is the last of three days focused on instructional leadership. Listening to the guest speaker, I once again question whether I should be a principal. I am confronted with thoughts around whether administrative expectations and my philosophies fit. I accept a purpose for assessment and data collection, but question how I can adapt information from this workshop to my exceptionally small school setting. Ultimately, I

feel overwhelmed with adding this to current responsibilities as a principal, teacher and LRT. A muddled internal conversation unfolds.

“Isn’t a lot of this common sense? The issue is finding the time to make it happen.”

“Am I the only person feeling this way?”

“I really believe my job is to sort, critically analyze and come to a personal truth. What if I disagree with what is being asked of me?”

“I believe in staff working collaboratively, but how do I maintain consistency when some are part time, and missing one or two people is a significant portion of the staff?”

“Though transformational leadership is discussed in literature, it is not always effective.”

“If, as the guest speaker suggests, Assessment for Learning (AFL) information isn’t what we use in our day to day work, but helps us know some basic information, how do I balance that with division expectation to set school goals based on AFL results, which forces me to use it in my day to day work as a teacher and administrator?” I wish I had answers and not only questions.

As the day continues, I participate in activities presented. I struggle to find my place, feeling as though I don’t fit in. I sit back and watch the enthusiasm and passion shown by others. Though I’m excited for them, I don’t understand why they are excited. I agree, in theory, but struggle with how, as an exceptionally small school, I can use the implementation methods suggested.

I want to blend in and be accepted, but don’t feel part of the group. I don’t think the same, act the same, believe the same things or do things in the same way. From a small school perspective, I yearn for the opportunity to celebrate unique methods of setting goals and

fulfilling division and ministry expectations in ways that honour who we are. It's difficult, if not impossible to do so when conformity and uniformity are not only the norm but expected.

We are challenged to choose between being a manager or instructional leader. In an exceptionally small school, it's not only impossible to choose but I don't have the luxury of choosing one over the other.

Mentally, I'm back in school.

"Someone peed on the boy's bathroom floor again."

"Constable McIntyre is here to say goodbye before he leaves for the Olympics."

"Our fundraiser rep was driving by and popped in to see you."

"We're doing a puppet show. Do you want to come and watch?"

"I'd like you to observe my Math class."

"They won't let me on the tetherball."

"The school division has called four times for the Extra Curricular form."

Sadly, the only request to which I cannot respond is observing the Math class. All grades have ELA and Math scheduled the same time. This created an additional challenge when, for this workshop, administrators were asked to observe teachers' reading strategies. Ah - another opportunity for creatively ensuring that expectations are being met! I recall meeting with my superintendent to discuss the process...

"I can't do what I'm being asked. I know what needs to be done, but I can't do it by watching in classrooms."

"What's getting in the way?"

"I teach when they do. Is getting a sub an option?"

“What if you meet with teachers and have a discussion. Individual teachers sharing their strategies – what they use and why – might be an interesting process.

“That I can do. I think I’ll use our early dismissal day.”

“Sounds like a great way to use that time. Let me know how it turns out.” I have such great respect for my superintendent. This is his first time in a rural school division and he supports flexible decisions. It’s a breath of fresh air and very freeing to know I can get things done in ways that work for us – a new experience for me in this division.

I refocus on the meeting. We are in groups, discussing data gleaned from observing teachers. We share the number of times we observed and length of each observation. My section of the chart is consistent: all zeroes. I do not have the opportunity to explain my situation and why, as a principal in an exceptionally small school I was not able to gather information as requested. I do not have the opportunity to explain that I fulfilled the expectations in a manner suiting our school size. I have information to share, but not the information being asked. I am embarrassed.

The meeting ends. It is not unsuccessful. I have gathered information and can make it work for our school. Once again the square peg in the round hole, meeting expectations will not have a standardized look. I question whether we will be celebrated for making it work or admonished for not ‘doing it right’.

I decide to go back to school. It is 10km ‘out of the way’ for my trip home but I often return after meetings to catch up on admin work. Today is no exception. When I arrive, school is over. Though students have gone, teachers remain, working quietly in their classrooms. The sound of vacuuming replaces the quiet. My caretaker is hard at work. Tom, walking across the hallway, sees me walk in.

“How did it go?”

“More of the same. Things we’re being asked to do. I’m not sure how we’ll get it done, but we’ll make it work for us.”

“But more work for everyone, hmm?”

“Yeah – it feels that way. Don’t worry – we’ll sit down and work it out together. It will be O.K.”

I try and protect staff. I may share my feeling about frustrations with difficult-to-manage expectations, but attempt to be upbeat and positive. I am not always successful.

At my office, I check e-mails. Student Services is requesting my LRT timetable that indicates time spent team teaching. This is a constant point of frustration. I believe there is nothing right about me being responsible for the three roles, so when I’m asked to prove that 50% of my LRT time is spent team teaching, I don’t respond positively. Frustrated, I type,

This year I took on the LRT role on top of my admin time and teaching time, so technically I’m doing a 1.529 position where I teach for 0.5 of the day and do my admin and LRT roles during the other 0.5 of my day. Consequently, I have no scheduled team teaching time. I work in all three capacities with teachers on a regular basis where we plan together and share teaching strategies. I’m in class on an ‘as requested’ basis.

Sorry, that’s the best I can do to help you out. (March 29, 2010)

I send this e-mail, nervous that I will receive a negative response. Part of me fears the division will insist I meet the 50% team teaching expectation. In previous years, principals not meeting division expectations received letters of non-compliance. Ouch! I see this as one of many examples where all schools in our division, regardless of size, staffing numbers or student needs are required to meet expectations in the same manner. I try hard to be compliant, but am

constantly frustrated with expectations versus reality. We experience successes when we can find new ways to make expectations work in our small school.

I read one more e-mail then wish I had waited until tomorrow. I have been surprised with the intensity of parent and community members' reactions to a situation involving a younger student. Concerns associated with student interactions outside of school have spilled into our setting, and elevated a situation I believe we managed well. Dealing with expectations and demands that 'something be done' has pre-occupied my administration time and thoughts this week. It is interesting how, in my exceptionally small rural school setting a school issue can so quickly become a community issue.

*...and once again
in the midst of change,
uncertainty and turmoil
I search for peace.*

*I trust that rightness and
my perception of common sense will prevail...*

*I believe that changes will
bring out strength,
endurance, flexibility, and
the best in everyone.*

*I hunger for a clear view of
the openness and transparency
of which we are assured.*

*I pray that a people based, child based
decision making process will be the norm.*

March 4, 2010

Connecting: Capacity to Meet Expectations



Figure 3: A heavy heart

*Today she longs for
...a clear, consistent, student-centered decision making process
...reasonable expectations with reasonable timelines
...a sense of empowerment rather than correction and intimidation
...expectations suited to a small school
...a sense that somebody 'gets' what we're all about* October 20, 2010

Expectations have enveloped me like a web, cloaking my learning resource teacher (LRT), teacher and principal roles. Expectations from various stakeholders – school staff, School Community Council (SCC), school division and Saskatchewan's Ministry of Education – impacted my role as a teaching principal job in an exceptionally small rural school. This is consistent with research indicating that parents', school division boards', upper management and politicians' expectations of teaching principals do not consider school size (Dunning, 1993).

A second theme arising from my research, capacity to meet expectations, reinforced what I intuitively believed to be part of my job. As a teaching principal of an exceptionally small rural school, I was expected to follow expectations set with larger schools in mind. My experiences are supported by research around 'one size fits all' policies (Dunning, 1993) which suggests that generic policies can be equally implemented by smaller and larger schools (Arnold, 2000; Pietsch & Williamson, 2008). I was not provided the opportunity to adapt expectations set for larger schools to my exceptionally small school setting. This is discussed in literature as

‘slipstream syndrome’ (Dunning). My research paralleled and expanded on current research around ‘one size fits all’ policies and the ‘slipstream syndrome’.

This chapter will focus on the school’s SCC, community, staff and school division’s expectations around ‘one size fits all’ policies and the ‘slipstream syndrome’. It will provide answers to my research questions, How does the context of an exceptionally small, rural school impact upon a teaching principal's role(s)? and How do stakeholder expectations (school staff, community, division, Ministry) impact teaching principals' roles and responsibilities in an exceptionally small rural school?

School Community Council and Community Expectations

My research indicated that SCC and community expectations are not always distinct. In January 2006, school division restructuring re-defined local school boards, transforming them into SCCs. Their roles evolved from support to direct involvement, where they are now required to have input into a school’s Learning Improvement Plan (LIP), goals, fundraising, and school-based initiatives. SCCs continue to represent a community’s ideas, values and beliefs.

Keeping our SCC involved and informed, yet not allowing their expectations to interfere (Wilson, 2009) was an interesting balance. Challenges arose with an SCC member’s school expectations. He feared that our inability to look and act like larger schools would result in the school division viewing us as inept, and that this would lead to school closure. His expectations that our exceptionally small school initiate and implement school-based projects in the same manner as a larger school (Dunning) re-surfaced throughout the year.

After hearing a larger school was involved in an anti-bullying pink T-shirt campaign, he asked our school to participate (May 7, 2010). Similarly, aware of larger schools’ organizing

Haiti disaster fundraisers, he questioned my lack of expediency. Expecting our school to fundraise in the same way during the same time period to ‘look good’ was frustrating. I wrote:

Is that what schools in the division need to do to get noticed? Has it become a ‘crown of honour’ for schools to say how much they raise? For all the stress of AFLs, new curricula, etc., we are celebrating fundraising ability. There has to be a way to celebrate goodness and sharing but as ‘doing well’ rather than ‘who can raise more’” (March 9, 2010).

I felt pressured to ‘be like everyone else’. He wanted us to publically celebrate our successes yet berated me if we did not look like or meet larger school standards. Frustrated, I wrote, *“Success indicates improvements – improvements come from recognizing something needs to change. So, he wants (us to celebrate our) successes but doesn’t want anyone to know the successes came from recognizing something we had to improve”* (December 18, 2009). I valued our exceptionally small school strengths and recognized strengths associated with our school size. Unfortunately, I felt we remained inadequate in his eyes.

My experiences paralleled research that discussed small schools appearing deficient when judged by standards used to evaluate larger schools (Bryant, 2009). I had difficulty explaining that our school with 50 students and four full time teachers could be successful without looking the same or doing things in the same way as larger schools (May 5, 2010).

The SCC member’s demands that our successes look the same as larger schools created challenges when he did not support school decisions in the community. For example, recognizing a change in student eating habits, staff tried to teach students healthy food choices by having them eat their healthiest snack at break time and save the less healthy options for lunch hour (March 3, 2010). Though one of eight SCC members saw it as an opportunity to

teach their child healthy food choices, our efforts were not supported. Parents felt we were controlling what their children were allowed to eat. Justifying and explaining our reasons to SCC, parents and students did not alleviate concerns. My process for informing parents may have been flawed, but lack of SCC support in the community exacerbated concerns. This topic was a year-long rift between the community and me (December 20, 2009).

The literature suggesting that teaching principals in small schools are twice as likely to report negative relationships within communities as other principals (Ewington et al., 2008) does not fit my experiences. Though I experienced challenges with some SCC and community members (January 13, January 21, June 30, 2010), positive experiences were more common. Other SCC members had realistic expectations around what a small school could do and accomplish. They verbally supported us, were positive during meetings and volunteered with noon hour supervision, preparing lunches and treats, and repairing playground equipment (March 3, March 5, April 13, May 13, 2010). Unique to an exceptionally small rural school setting are relationship expectations of 'telling all'. Phone calls ensuring that I was aware of an issue between two students at a non-school function (April 15, 2010), or a parent telling me why her child was grounded (March 8, 2010) were common.

School-parent relationships required to support student needs, a component of community expectations is not addressed in the literature. Parents had expectations to be informed of and actively involved in strategies needed to support their children's needs (February 26, 2010; June 10, 2010; May 8, 2010). Twenty five of 50 students received English as an Alternate Language (EAL), academic or behaviour support. Meeting parents' expectations of relationship-building and regular communication was vital for their child's success.

The impact of parent and community expectations on my LRT role was time. Previously, school-initiated phone calls to parents regarding student programming and support were initiated by the LRT. One hundred five documented conversations with three parents between November and June provided proof that the LRT role added time to my every-expanding 'to do' list.

Statistical data itself does not provide a thorough picture of time and effort required to fulfill parental expectations around keeping them involved with plans and supports connected to their child's social, behaviour and academic skill development. Time spent with parents and involvement in a strong community-school leadership role helped keep parents informed. Speaking at the Canadian Association of Principals' Conference (2010), Dr. Stephanie Pace Marshall's quote that "narrative trumps data every time" supports my rich detailed research that describes how I fulfilled parents' expectations to be informed and involved and provides examples of the impact on my roles.

A student's medical diagnosis helped explain his difficulty interacting with adults and unacceptable social behaviours. Working with parents and our school counselor, we regularly revised strategies to monitor and respond to his negative behaviour. Four years spent developing this relationship resulted in a trusting school-parent relationship, meeting parents' expectations and ultimately provided necessary support.

The research does not provide data around parents' expectations that teaching principals have answers and are experts around their child's needs. Two issues unique to an exceptionally small rural school that impact parents' expectations concerning teaching principal's expertise, are familiarity with the teaching principal (Chance & Segura, 2009) and my multiple roles. In my LRT role, I worked with a child who struggled with transitions. Though I lacked training, I coached and supported the family through medical specialists, behaviour and academic issues. I

documented 40 in-person, phone and e-mail parent contact times. The student's mother calling to say she would not attend parent teacher interviews because, "*we're going to tell her what she already knows*" (April 13, 2010) spoke to the time and energy I spent ensuring that I had the knowledge and expertise needed to ensure her child's academic and behaviour supports were in place. I played a strong administrative role around consequence issues and an equally strong LRT role providing him with adapted academic programming.

Similar to the literature, social work expectations were associated with my job (Webb & Vulliamy, 1996). Parents' expectations of teaching principals' availability to discuss personal or family problems is unique to exceptionally small rural school settings. I listened to issues associated with marital problems (February 22, 2010), hospitalized children (May 3, 2010), and difficult family interactions (January 7, 2010).

Meeting parents' expectations fits research on the 'slipstream syndrome' (Dunning, 1993). Where larger schools have different people to meet parents' expectations (Webb & Vulliamy, 1996) exceptionally small schools are expected to meet the same needs, but with fewer staff. In my context, I was meeting the same expectations that three separate roles - LRT, teacher and principal – would meet in a larger school.

Not addressed in the literature and unique to our small rural school is an expectation of the school's visibility in the community. Requests for community involvement included students writing stories and poems for the community's 100th anniversary celebrations (May 13, 2010) to conducting the spring town clean-up (May 14, 2010). I was challenged with balancing the 'political correctness' of meeting expectations and honouring instructional time.

Parent expectations on my roles directly and indirectly affected staff expectations of me. Staffs' expectations to be involved in student behaviour and academic implementation plans and aware of division-based expectations impacted my role as a teaching principal.

Staff Expectations

Research identifying staff expectations on a teaching principal is implied, not transparent. Increased understanding of how staff expectations impacted my roles and responsibilities arose from re-examining my journal entries pertaining to interactions and conversations between the professionals, support staff and me.

Increased needs and expectations arose with teachers' needs to balance external demands and expectations. My research supports the literature that connects teaching principals with a teacher sanity gatekeeper role (Murdock & Schiller, 2002). Teaching principals protect teachers from tasks that take them away from classrooms and field criticisms aimed at them (Webb & Vulliamy, 1996).

Reacting to a staff cut, our staff was required to fill and timetable the LRT position. Though no one on staff had training, we decided that I would assume the LRT position (December 17, 2010). Agreeing to add LRT to my other roles helped teachers maintain current workloads and double grades. This parallels research indicating that teaching principals take on a teaching role to maintain a level of sanity (Dunning, 1993). Adding the LRT role to my teaching and principal roles may have maintained sanity for the staff, but did not for me.

Addressed in the literature are challenges teaching principals in small schools experience around being loyal to teachers and parents (Clarke & Wildy, 2004). Though my research paralleled Webb and Vulliamy (1996) indicating that teachers expect principals to support them by fielding criticisms, it differed in that I did not withhold information. A highly emotional

parent concerned about a teacher called me at home. I invited her to speak directly with the teacher. She refused. After listening to and documenting her concerns, I e-mailed the teacher and Educational Psychologist. *“I hate sending these types of e-mails. I know it will be really hard for her to hear this, but I need to share it”* (April 25, 2010). Appreciating the difficulty in hearing negative comments, the following day I *“gave her a hug, told her I was sorry, and reassured her that she was a professional and doing a great job”* (April 26, 2010).

Staff expected me to be a sanity gatekeeper. I accepted responsibilities that may otherwise have been assigned to teachers (Wilson & McPake, 2000). My research aligned with Coulson’s comment regarding a head-teacher’s role in protecting teachers:

Acting as the school’s principal disturbance-handler is a prominent and essential part of the head’s task or organizational maintenance. By bearing the brunt of this task he enables his teaching colleagues to go about their work, the principal work of the school, with a minimum of distraction (Coulson, as cited in Webb & Vulliamy, 1996, p. 305).

I dealt with a student’s tongue stuck to a metal pole in winter (February 8, 2010), a bathroom water fight (May 19, 2010), and a student’s in-class anxiety attack (March 1, 2010). Teachers were able to remain in their classroom and not lose instruction time. This was not always beneficial. With me adopting a strong role dealing with student issues, teachers lost the opportunity to develop their own skills.

At times, I felt sorry for myself because, *“it feels like I [was] having to do everything”* (June 21, 2010). Ultimately, I carried many responsibilities, *“wanting to protect and give teachers the opportunity to focus on school work”* (May 27, 2010). Struggling to manage my workload, I dropped previously participated-in school activities only to *“feel guilty for not at least trying”* (May 27, 2010).

Nonetheless, gatekeeping by taking on that role gave me the opportunity to change ‘D-Hall’ – an inflexible student consequence process – to modeling restitution as an alternate method for student accountability. Modeling was successful, but not without a significant impact on my time. Considering the amount of time spent meeting others’ expectations, I looked at my angel statue and wrote:

She’s tired of feeling tired...

Tired of always having something to do...

Tired of not being able to take a break...

Tired of doing for everyone else and nothing for herself...

May 10, 2010

Not addressed in literature, but derived from personal experience and documented in my journals, was a staff expectation that I would have expert answers in all my roles, including LRT, where I lacked formal training. I was in an absurd situation, where I planned, but did not implement programs for high needs students (January 4, 2010). Using unpaid time, our EA daily shared her documentation and implementation strategies. She expected me to have answers, and though I tried hard, I lacked confidence. I considered myself a charlatan (February 8, 2010), giving the appearance that I knew what I was doing without the skills to do so. “*I continue to feel completely out of my league - I have to trust her interpretation and response to working with students so I know what to plan next...a frustration to say the least*” (January 4, 2010).

An EA working with English as a Second Language (EAL) students was unsure of how to implement phonetic sounds worksheets. Though it was my job to have answers, bi-monthly Speech Language Pathologist meetings did not provide me adequate information to support the EA. Other issues requiring answers in my various roles included concerns around students without adequate food (January 8, 2010), staffing (April 12, 2010), managing a student’s hygiene

problem (January 22, 2010), and changes in student academic programming (April 18, 2010).

Staying informed was a reasonable staff expectation. I struggled with finding time and methods to keep them updated, especially during periods of high staff absences. Monday memos, white board notes, formal and informal meetings ensured effective communication. Though I preferred speaking directly with staff, e-mails quickly informed them of administrative or LRT decisions that impacted interactions with students (February 25, 2010).

Multiple roles were a factor in my ability to meet expectations. Though keeping teachers informed and being readily available ensured they did not feel ignored (Grady, 1990), they knew I was ‘dropping the ball’. Discussing my concerns, one teacher replied, “*at least we knew why you were dropping the ball. It wasn’t that you wanted to or didn’t work hard enough, you just had too much on your plate...*” (July 6, 2010). I was suffering from lack of sleep (June 25, 2010) and had become forgetful. I lost forms with money (January 5, 2010) and my marks binder (March 22, 2010), and forgot to write an LRT report card (January 22, 2010).

Though community and staff expectations impacted my job as a teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school, school division expectations had a much larger impact. Amid community and staff expectations, I did not question my ability to do my job. That was not true with division expectations. This is the theme I discuss next.

School Division Expectations

*In a place that forces me to be one of many,
Fit a mold,
Be the norm,*

I refuse.

*And in doing so
I become an island
with a wealth of information, unheard, apart from, insignificant.*

I care.

The system tells me to make learning measurable.

No sweat.

Hugs are measurable.

Smiles are measurable.

Notes saying, "Thanks for helping me manage my anger" are measurable.

A coloured picture for my bulletin board because I, too, believe in fairies and unicorns is measurable.

Watching grade 8's help kindergarteners build a snow fort is measurable.

Children struggle.

We reach out.

Children grow.

January 7, 2010

The literature suggests that teaching principals experience stresses around legislation demanding greater accountability to externally imposed changes. Expectations around school improvements and reforms mandate, appraise, control and admonish rather than assist principals (Arnold, 2000; Starr & White, 2008). Experiencing similar feelings associated with increased expectations, I wrote, *"I don't even want to go to the (admin) meeting because I'm afraid that once again I'll be told what I'm doing wrong, and there will be more put on our plate, and again everything will be accountability"* (February 8, 2010). Increased accountability was realized in instructional leadership and management expectations associated with my roles.

Management expectations.

Teaching principals are challenged with accountability and mandatory compliance to externally mandated policies and initiatives (Dunning, 1993; Reeves, 2003; Starr & White, 2008). Accountability requirements addressed in the literature include developing school plans, basic skills testing, paperwork and detailed documentation, curriculum implementation, annual school reports, and issues with legal implications (Dunning; Meyer & MacMillan, 2001;

Murdock & Schiller, 2002). My research provided evidence of management accountability requirements and division initiatives that impacted my role as a teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school.

I found evidence of research around the ‘slipstream syndrome’ (Dunning, 1993) in all external stakeholder expectations and all my roles. My analogy to the ‘slipstream syndrome’ is saying, “It does not matter whether you have the inner tube or a rafting boat, we expect you to get through the rapids in the same way.” This strategy would not work. People in the inner tube and rafting boat would get through – it just would not look the same. My rapids analogy parallels the slipstream syndrome expectations on small schools.

The ‘slipstream syndrome’ was evident in expectations associated with paperwork and mandatory compliance to accountability (Dunning, 1993; Starr & White, 2008). My research parallels the literature where expectations associated with paperwork manifested in my principal, LRT and teacher roles were not dissimilar to expectations on larger schools (Dunning). Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) reports, month end reports, purchase orders, work requisitions, staff leave requests and monthly extra curricula forms required regular completion. E-mails requesting feedback on caretaker evaluations (January 16, 2010), an R.C.M.P. identifier project (February 5, 2010), votes for the 2010 division school calendar (March 19, 2010), plans for early dismissal days (March 4, 2010), and Strategic Plan information (May 30, 2010), though necessary, were time consuming. My busiest e-mail day was February 25, 2010, where 3 miscellaneous, 15 division staff, 26 school staff, 15 school counselor and 8 school psychologist e-mails were sent and received.

Expectations involving detailed documentation primarily stemmed from working with students. I did not necessarily distinguish which role, principal or LRT, was documenting. Two

hundred twenty four of 337 student-based journal documentations focused on seven students. Documentation included student conversations, behaviour and academic incidents, meetings and e-mails, phone calls, and face-to-face contact with parents. This documentation, not a stated division expectation, provided necessary information to ensure student support was realized.

I wanted to secure the alternate school best suited to meet Dave's needs. Chronicling steps needed to support his transition, I documented 13 meetings, e-mail contacts and form completions. Support information was gleaned from 39 documentation entries describing his social behaviour struggles, needs, and team meetings with parents, the school counselor and myself as principal and LRT. Hearing of his acceptance to the new school confirmed that *"all my efforts and energies hadn't been in vain, and there may actually be a chance I was listened to and heard....such a relief and such high emotions"* (June 4, 2010).

An inordinate amount of time, energy and documentation ensured continuing EA support for another student. Fifty eight distinct journal entries documented conversations and meetings with parents, medical specialists, our school counselor, and my thoughts associated with his behaviour and academic challenges. Between June 8 and June 23, my school counselor and I wrote a Background, Rationale, and Recommendation report (BRR) and submitted it to the superintendent, I sent a letter to a medical specialist, and wrote follow-up e-mails to check on process. I was not convinced the division would hear or support us:

I have no idea where this will go, but I need them to hear what we need. If they don't, he will totally fall apart next year and there just won't be any support for him. I'm really afraid for what that would mean for him (June 8, 2010).

Expectations to complete documents having legal implications were less frequent, but necessary. Student accident forms were completed as the need arose. Bus evacuation, fire drill

and lockdown procedure forms were required before year end. Trouble contacting our bus supervisor and a rainy spring made compliance difficult. With busses and personnel available, we “*stuffed in as much as we could*”, completing all three activities on June 3, 2010.

Management and instructional leadership expectations attached to division and Ministry surveys were significant in my research. Though survey completion is identified in research as a managerial expectation (Hunt, 2000), the impact of extra paperwork on teaching principals roles is not considered. The division forwarded Ministry surveys, reinforcing expectations for completion. Survey results used to set school goals impacted my instructional leadership role.

A Treaty Education survey was undertaken by the Office of the Treaty Commissioner and supported by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. In my principal’s role, our school division expected me to ensure the survey was completed by all teachers and grade 7 students, and set a school goal based on survey results. The first step was presenting a Power Point describing the survey’s purpose and history, and division and school-specific results to staff and the SCC. Though other administrators appreciated the division-designed common Power Point, I was not comfortable with the process. I felt someone directly involved in the process would have been a more suitable presenter. “*Expected to be the ‘expert’ presenter*” (May 21, 2010), presenting significant information without adequate background knowledge, made me feel I inadequate to accomplish the task as requested.

A Safe and Caring Schools survey conducted by the division required my involvement as a teacher and principal. Principals were asked to share information with staff and parents, encouraging them to complete the voluntary survey. I forwarded information to staff, and my secretary informed parents through our computer-based ‘parent watch’ communication system (April 19, 2010). Receiving four memos from head office, reminding us of a completion date

and extended completion date, I repeated the process (April 26, 27, 29, 2010). Expectations did not end with distributing information and encouraging survey completion. As a teacher, I was expected to give my students class time to complete the survey. Younger students, answering a survey designed for adults, were challenged by the vocabulary (May 3, 2010). Explaining each question took time away from curriculum instruction.

Budget accountability is mentioned in research as a managerial responsibility (Dowling, 2009), and viewed as the part of a head teacher's job responsible for re-defining their position as "businessmen" (Webb & Vulliamy, 1996, p. 304). My experiences differed from research in that my budget did not include staff salaries. My research illustrated examples of school division expectations that do not consider the restrictive nature of an exceptionally small school's decentralized budget. Though all schools had a decentralized budget, accommodations were not made for expenses that all schools incur, regardless of size.

A letter from the finance department indicated that our budget had exceeded a maximum variance (January 6, 2010). I had no idea what that meant. Struggling with expectations around our decentralized budget, I wrote, *"I find this hilarious. There's a belief that secretaries should do the books (and that's OK) yet principals are ultimately accountable – without training or access to the accounting program"* (May 19, 2010).

Justifying why we had spent more than 34% of our budget was directly related to expenses unique to our exceptionally small school. We incurred costs for new laptops connected to our SMART board, new curriculum textbooks and teacher guides, and math manipulatives. Our decentralized budget, based on student numbers, was not set up to consider multigrades. New grade 8 science resources totaled \$826.28. Including resources for grade seven students added \$500.00 to our science expenses. Over a two year period, text books, resources, and two

laptops cost \$13 294. 85 (May 6, 2010). Our entire budget for the same time period was \$27 210.00. Expenses related to math, middle years social studies and science curricula left us “*so low in funds we need[ed] to be careful what we ordered (for next year’s supplies)*” (May 19, 2010). Discussing this issue with the finance department did little to alleviate my concerns. They were sympathetic, but it felt as though “*it’s accepted that ‘this is the way it is’ and there isn’t any consideration for how (small) school will purchase texts without an increase in funding to decentralized budgets*” (May 10, 2010). Left with half my budget to support needs in areas other than curriculum, I recognized how small schools get “*doubly hit with expenses, and there’s no accommodation for funding around the new curriculum*” (May 3, 2010).

The finance department approved a financial reimbursement for text book costs (June 21, 2010). Our school received \$494.85. Though the decision gave me a sense of being heard, and I recognized the “*effort made to realize how (expenses) have impacted our school,*” the decision included all schools, so was not unique for small schools where a larger portion of our budget was spent on mandated resources.

Though division expectations around managerial roles were time consuming and frustrating, I was more challenged to meet leadership expectations associated with instructional leadership and my LRT position.

Instructional leadership expectations.

Data from personal documentation and a school division newsletter (February, 2009) show that 105 school division initiatives were implemented between January, 2006 and June, 2010. My research is supported by the literature discussing challenges small school staffs experience in implementing policies perceived as inappropriate or irrelevant (Reeves, 2003). This was especially true with Assessment for Learning (AFL) provincial assessment results, a

mandated component in developing school goals. Participants at a Saskatchewan School Based Administrators (SSBA) module (March 25, 2010) addressed two issues around AFLs that parallel my concerns. Division expectations that schools use math, reading and writing AFL results to guide school goals do not give special consideration to exceptionally small schools for which school-based results are non-existent. A second discussion addressed student anonymity. ELA and Math AFL results are shared our SCC. Connecting student results to actual students in a small school and small town setting was a concern.

Speaking at the Canadian Association of Principals (CAP) conference, Sir Ken Robinson suggested that “standardization gives you the lowest common denominator, customization raises the standard”. His thoughts reflect my feelings around the ineffectiveness of AFLs. *“I get overwhelmed with all the external expectations...I want to reflect on my job and all its dimensions, but my frustration with data based accountability and how the focus is on ‘whether students are learning’ rather than ‘meeting all needs’ gets in the way”* (February 8, 2010).

Survey results created a similar concern of providing our SCC information to collaboratively set school goals yet not identify individual’s comments. I was concerned with comments made by students and the accuracy of their perceptions (May 3, 2010). Of equal concern was the expectation of setting goals when *“only two staff and I think 3 or 4 parents replied, so there is nothing statistically accurate about the results”* (May 30, 2010).

I was frustrated that this survey lacked questions about school division or head office roles, or *“superintendents’ involvement to ensure schools are a safe and caring place or whether division maintenance is completed in a timely fashion. Once again, everything is at a school level”* (April 19, 2010). It felt like ‘one more thing on us’, and a lack of understanding around expectations on teaching principals in exceptionally small rural schools.

My research around school goal expectations connects to the literature around the ‘slipstream syndrome’ (Dunning, 1993). Small schools are expected to follow mandated policies just like larger schools. This left me frustrated, feeling as though we were required to ‘act like a big school’ and not honour our small school strengths (Bryant, 2007).

Research suggests that teaching principals deal with initiative implementation expectations by realistically planning for achievable targets, implementing through available resources, signing off and moving on to the next initiative (Wilson & McPake ,2000). My experiences similarly necessitated creative solutions to fit our unique context while remaining compliant with division expectations. Similar to Wallin’s research (2008), our exceptionally small school had fewer people than larger schools to manage external expectations.

Acknowledging a high workload, we attempted to set goals not requiring extra planning and documentation. Literacy, part of the division’s strategic plan and a school concern, became one goal. Professional staff chose the same literacy assessment method required by the division for grade 2 assessments (May 25, 2010). We purchased the kit, giving us an available resource. Signing off, as Wilson and McPake suggested, was not an option. Goals and assessment results were evaluated after each assessment (April 28, 2010). A division expectation that principals submit a year-end summary indicating actions on school SMART goals (May 30, 2010) did not give me the option to sign off and move on. Setting an effective math goal proved to be more difficult, and resulted in us regularly revisiting the goal (March 22, 2010).

Goal setting expectations associated with data management were not limited to AFLs. We were expected to use information gleaned from basic skills testing formats. Grades 3 and 6 Canadian Achievement Test (CAT) 4 assessments and division-wide grade 4 math and grade 7 science assessments were used to further develop our Learning Improvement Plan. Conducting

these assessments in a multigrade setting was a challenge. Teachers creatively planned lessons to keep one or more grades busy while assessing the other (April 19, 2010). Because student assessments occurred while I was teaching or occupied with managerial tasks, I was unable to support teachers. I solved this problem by using a personal sick day. I stayed in school and asked the substitute teacher to give teachers out-of-classroom time to complete assessments. It was an innovative way to support teachers, making their assessment time more productive.

School wellness goals were an additional expectation to our LIP. Focusing on virtues representing letters in our school name, we celebrated positive behaviour (June 10, 2010). Inviting the community to share positive behaviours seen outside the school, we created a school-community celebration team. It was one expectation where I felt we had the autonomy to make goals work for our small school, rather than fit a norm and process set for larger schools.

The impact on my roles was not only frustration but an ever-increasing work load. I felt as though nothing could be “*done for the sake of doing or learned for the sake of learning*” (May 16, 2010) without a rider of data accountability or expectation attached to it. A comment from head office suggesting that it would be good for principals to follow their example of conducting personal appraisals added to my frustration (May 16, 2010). Inter-office division expectations were being transferred to our school settings and would have translated into more paperwork and more time away from students. I chose not to participate in this activity.

My superintendent sent an e-mail requesting that a division-based ‘Strategic Plan Information’ form and school goals summary be completed by year end. “*Boy, this was a hard one to receive* (May 30, 2010). It was depressing to hear that we were not only responsible for school-based SMART goals in math, literacy, wellness, Treaty Education and soon-to-be Safe and Caring Schools, but were now expected to meet SMART goals set by the division. “*My*

heart literally dropped when I read this. It was like, ‘Oh no, one more thing – one more thing to justify – one more thing to do – even more accountability. I literally started shaking’” (May 30, 2010). *“I dealt with it by not dealing with it and put it on the back burner until I [was] more ready”* (May 30, 2010). I struggled with division expectations of my role. I did not know how much more I could do or how much more I could ask of the staff.

Principals are subject to “vagaries of externally determined changes” (Johnson & Pickergill, as cited in Dunning, 1993, p. 81). I found this in my study as well. Seventy of the 105 division initiatives mentioned were directly related to LRT or principal management and instructional leadership roles. New initiatives included a student data management and reporting system, and a new computer program for managing decentralized budgets. Other new initiatives, including Ministry curricula, literacy models, kindergarten and pre-kindergarten assessment models, SMART goals and changing processes attached to staff supervision challenged my role as an instructional leader.

I identified with research stating that teaching principals as instructional leaders experience externally mandated compliance to instructional improvement plans and monitoring colleagues (Chance & Lindgren, 1989, Graczewski et al, 2009; Meyer & MacMillan, 2001). I became increasingly cognizant of our division’s expectations when using Saskatchewan Education Leadership Unit (SELU) as the information provider they organized a three day instructional leadership workshop. Based on previous experiences, I expected this would lead to increased expectations and greater accountability.

Accountability expectations around curriculum implementation as a managerial role (Meyer & MacMillan, 2001; Murdock & Schiller, 2002) rang less true to me than division expectations around curriculum implementation as an instructional leadership role (Wilson &

McPake, 2000). Having more instructional leadership credibility as a teaching principal (Wilson & McPake) may have been true but new Ministry curricula left me feeling unqualified to support teachers. Within a three year period, all teachers, myself included, learned new math curricula for at least two grades, and supported each other through the process. Familiarizing myself with curricula I was teaching did not leave me time to learn other curricula and ensure correct teacher implementation (April 15, 2010; May 10, 2010).

I received an e-mail asking whether I had collected teachers' long range plans and evaluation schemes and had read them to ensure they aligned with Ministry curricula. I feared repercussions if I said no, yet division expectations around the new Ministry middle-years curricula did not give consideration to the fact that they were not only new to teachers, but to principals as well. Saying yes would not be honest and saying no would leave me non-compliant. Given the response timeline, answering no would have required me to learn all grade 7 and 8 curricula in three days. I was not provided the flexibility to do my job well. Answering yes saved me time and lessened my anxiety (October 23, 2010).

My experience parallels the literature indicating that supervision in small schools occurs through informal processes (Meier, 1996). Formal or informal staff supervision, a division expectation, did not happen. Our school was small enough that I could easily see or hear teacher lessons and student-teacher interactions. On rare occasions, I sat in the classroom, corrected student work and observed the teacher sharing my classroom (January 6, 2010). Teaching principal's classroom commitments restrict time available to monitor colleagues (Dunning, 1993). My time constraints were similar, but compounded with my LRT commitments.

Aware of not adequately supervising teachers and EAs, division accountability consequences left me concerned. School priorities over-ruled five attempts at organizing an EA

evaluation meeting. I compensated by asking teachers to independently complete the evaluation. Using their comments, I wrote the evaluation. After meeting with each EA, I created a final report. Evaluations were completed, but not using the defined process (June 17, 2010). The literature indicates that concerns around staff supervision are not unique to teaching principals in small schools (Eady & Zepeda, 2007; Grady, 1990).

The literature describes role duality as one person responsible for teaching and administrative roles (Dunning, 1993). Unique to my roles and research was the LRT role. Expectations around attending meetings, contact with parents, support personnel and external agencies, and paperwork associated with the role added extra work and took time away from my teaching principal's role. I believe that adding the LRT role played a significant role in feelings associated with my job this year:

I don't even want to go to the admin meeting because I'm afraid that once again I'll be told what I'm doing wrong, and there will be more put on our plate, and again everything will be accountability. ...a superintendent report says he will be checking (for a report to the director) how much time LRTs are co-teaching...hooped again (February 8, 2010).

I struggled with the division's expectation that 50% of LRT time be spent team teaching. To be compliant, team teaching would have comprised 25% of my day, leaving me 25% to realize my administrative and remaining LRT responsibilities.

As LRT, teachers and I were to set two school goals based on the Student Services Rubric. Once again aware that three full time teachers and I created and implemented all schools goals, we did not do this. A superintendent's e-mail reminding me of an impending visit from our Student Services Coordinator (February 8, 2010) gave me six weeks to compile information. Discussing the exemplars, teachers focused on inclusionary practices. Amid my concerns of

‘dropping the ball’, staff identified that as LRT, I effectively shared individual student strategies with EAs and classroom teachers. A comment that, “it has made a tough situation work out pretty well” (C. Lone, personal communication, February 9, 2010) discussed our team approach to referrals. A report created from staff discussions was used to lead and direct a discussion between my student service coordinator and me. *“The best part was that I actually felt I had a chance to talk with (my student service coordinator)”* (April 16, 2010). I valued staff input and used a process to discuss successes, opportunities and challenges within the LRT role that did not follow a prescribed procedure, but fit our exceptionally small school needs.

Conclusion

Reading my daily journals and daily documentation provided me a wealth of data to answer the research question, How do stakeholder expectations (school staff, community, division, Ministry) impact a teaching principal’s roles and responsibilities in an exceptionally small rural school? I identified with the literature addressing expectations on teaching principals in small schools. ‘One size fits all’ policies and the ‘slipstream syndrome’ especially rang true to me.

With the exception of staff, stakeholders were challenged to see that, though exceptionally small rural schools are capable of fulfilling external expectations, the process may not fit pre-determined methods. Two challenges to my roles became apparent. One was to be compliant within the context of expectations more suited to larger schools. The other was to push boundaries that respectfully challenged stakeholder’s views of an exceptionally small rural school’s capacity to meet expectations, and within this context, celebrate our unique exceptionally small rural school capabilities. Using my river rapids analogy, I wanted our inner tube to shoot the rapids. I knew there were people standing on the shore shouting directions

through a megaphone. I longed to hear them say, “It’s O.K. if you veer from the required path. Navigate the course so you finish without capsizing your inner tube.”

Navigating through expectations was compounded with additional teaching principal qualifiers not discussed in the literature. Not only was I a teaching principal, I was an LRT teaching principal. The other qualifier placed me as an LRT teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school. Both played a significant role on stakeholder expectations associated with my roles. Expectations left me with a sense of never doing well enough or having enough time. I questioned my abilities and capabilities which ultimately left me feeling inadequate and overwhelmed.

‘Within the walls we are O.K.’ has been my mantra for some time. Amid what I felt was a barrage of expectations, I ultimately believed we were meeting student needs. When overwhelmed and required to selectively choose which expectation would receive my time, I always chose to meet immediate student needs. Writing in my journal, my mind swirling with thoughts around expectations, I looked at my angel statue and wrote:

She picks up her pen in trust

*That words of celebration
fulfillment
and caring
will fill her pages.*

*And amidst expectations
accountability
doubts
insecurities and
uncertainties*

*There is room to be positive
To remember life better than ‘good enough’.*

March 4, 2010

Chapter 6

Building Relationships: Meeting People Where They Are

It just hit me – relationships – that’s what my job is all about. It’s establishing relationships and working within their boundaries. It’s relationships with and between students, relationships with and between teachers, and relationships with and between parents.

June 15, 2010

I open the door and am greeted with silence. Our caretaker is so consistent I know I won’t have to fumble for keys. I look at my watch - 7:45 a.m. I take a deep breath, reminding myself to expect the unexpected and not be surprised if the only thing accomplished on my ‘to do’ list is the first point – ‘write a list’.

My day starts earlier than usual, wide awake at 5:45 thinking of everything I need to get done today. It makes more sense to get up and leave home at 6:35 – a bit earlier than my typical 7:00. I use the 50 minute drive to eat breakfast, listen to my favourite radio station, practice songs for adult choir (the only thing I do not related to school) and mentally organize my day. I think about yesterday’s work that didn’t get done or is unresolved: calls to parents, division paperwork, talking to students about various issues, advocating high needs students’ supports, and prep for grade 5 and 6 Math and English Language Arts (ELA) – the two classes I teach.

Balancing my purse, laptop, backpack, school bag and lunch kit, I climb the 17 stairs leading to an area affectionately known as ‘upstairs’. (It’s no surprise that the other area, with two classrooms and bathrooms, is the ‘downstairs’.) Five more steps. I’m at my office. I wonder whether there was intentional symbolism in its construction (above everyone, overseeing all, I hope not). I drop my bags on the landing and unlock my door. Stepping into my office, I look at my desk with chagrin and am reminded of a conversation with Kara, a fellow teacher.

“Can you believe this? I think I’m going to name my office ‘The Disaster’”.

“What do you expect? You are trying to find room for all your principal, teacher, and learning resource teacher (LRT) resources in a 10 by 10 room. You shouldn’t be surprised.”

My desk is covered with forms for chocolate sales, Scholastic Book orders to be separated and distributed to students, math corrections, notes from a meeting between me, a mom and medical specialist I need to type and e-mail, Christmas drawings and candy canes the Student Leadership Council (SLC) hasn’t delivered to students, report cards to be copied and mailed to a parent not living in town, a reminder that I need to plan more Life Skills math for two students, numerous notes from my secretary, and whatever else is hibernating in the pile. Added to that, my space is a ‘catch-all’ for SLC planning, tools, mail, and ‘Can you keep this for me so I don’t lose it?’ items students forgot to collect and I forgot to return.

Then there’s my shelf. It’s overflowing with binders from admin meetings, personal development (PD) workshops, classes I teach, LRT resources and all my documentation. I can’t seem to find a good way to organize things.

I move things around, adding to the pile of books and papers that overflow a basket sitting on my desk corner. I look up, take a deep breath and smile, grateful for a window that fills one wall and overlooks the playground. The natural light gives my small room a sense of space. Opening my e-mails, I answer the ‘easy’ ones. The others can wait until my afternoon admin time. In my teacher role, I correct some grade 5/6 Math then switch to LRT and plan math so my educational assistant (EA) can work with our two boys today.

It’s now after 8:00. Collecting materials to copy before I start teaching at 9:00, I walk toward the staffroom. Teachers arrive around 8:15 and I plan to win the race to the photocopier.

“Good morning, April. How was your evening?” I greet our school secretary/librarian, already settled into her desk.

“Fine. My daughter called and we’ll be helping her move next week. Hope called wants you to call her back. Connie wants you to put Al’s homework together and send it with Mike.”

“No problem. I’ll get to it as soon as I get this copied.”

I feel sorry for April. We rarely get time to touch base. Once a week, attempting to stay connected, I try to have a 15 to 20 minute ‘face-to-face’ conversation. Other than that, though we are close enough to hear each other shout, we rely on e-mails. It’s not the best way to maintain an effective working relationship, but we’re making it work.

That’s when I remember. I switched supervision with Mary so my sub won’t have outdoor supervision tomorrow. We’re a feeder school for a near-by high school, where supervision starts with the arrival of our K to 8 bus students. Scheduled to arrive at 8:30, they arrive any time after 8:23. Other schools have the luxury of buses following division protocol, arriving at 8:45. Our extra supervision time unrecognized by the division is the pebble in our shoe – a non-issue in the division’s eyes, and constant irritant for our teachers.

As I complete last minute work, students begin to arrive. I love this part of the day. I’m guaranteed to have three or four students run to my office, tell me about a bus incident, what they did last night, or show me a new piece of clothing. Enter Shauna showing me her new shoes, followed by Laura with last night’s excitement – searching for a missing donkey. As I get ready to go outside and we continue to talk, David, our student with a pervasive developmental disorder, yells from the end of the hallway.

“Hey, Mrs. D., look at my new clothes!” I cringe, note his excitement with his orange jump suit, and wonder how to respond. I’ve become quite good at coaching him in social skills,

but coaching him in socially appropriate school attire is new. I have no issue with what he wears, but I know he's setting himself up. As much as I would like to believe no one will tease him, something will be said that leads to him responding with an emotional outburst. Karen, our school counselor, is scheduled for a visit. We work well together developing processes and language to support David. I decide to say nothing until I speak with her.

"Nice, Dave!! Remember what you need to do when you get to school in the morning?"

"Yep, I remember – go to the computer room and don't bug anyone. Can I play a game?"

"Do you know which one?"

"Yeah, it has to be school appropriate," he responds in a tone that implies he has heard this before. This means our persistence in maintaining behaviour and language routines is working. It's taken many gentle reminders for his response to feel natural. "....and you know what? Our dog had puppies last night. You should come to our house and see them."

"I'd love to, but maybe we need to wait until they are a bit older. Talk to your mom. She'll know the best time."

"O.K. – and Mrs. D.? That box we have for me isn't working very good anymore."

"That's OK, Dave. Maybe we can talk today and find something that will work better for you now. I have to go outside for supervision. If I forget, find me this afternoon to remind me."

I know he will. His need for order and consistency will not allow him to forget.

"O.K."

As I head outside, now later than I should be, I'm reminded of how far we've come with David. Four years of advocating for a half time EA, hours of parental contact, monthly meetings, and support from our school counselor has paid off. His EA (or 'adult coach' as we call her) helping him read social situations, then discussing and practicing appropriate

responses has decreased explosive behaviours and given him support needed to reduce his screaming, shaking, hiding and running-away responses to stress and changes in routine. I would never have dreamt we could be this successful. David gets at least 10 minutes of my time every day, but often requires more. Touching base is part of his routine and reassurance that his world is in order. We talk about changes to routine, what to expect around those changes, how it will affect him and appropriate ways to respond. He leaves notes on my desk. The latest one said, "Thank you for helping me manage my anger." His mom sent me a note saying, "We're a great team." There's no better compliment, but more important, our efforts are working.

I step outside, holding my tea thermos, and hear a shout.

"Push me, Mrs. D.!"

After the obligatory swing pushing session, I start walking toward the 'big kids', our grade 5 to 8 students. I'm suddenly attacked from behind. Four grade 2 girls are hanging onto my legs, giggling like only grade 2 girls can. It's that high-pitched, almost uncontrollable 'nothing can be funnier in my world' laughter. We laugh through their sing-song 'mommy', me trying to keep my balance, walking as they hang on. The game ends, and I move toward the older students. I'm reminded of how many students see us as a type of parent, another role we play, the responsibility that comes with how students see and perceive us, and how they connect with teachers to feel safe and welcome. My thoughts bring me back to an earlier event.

Kristine, a grade one student, had been absent, attending her grandmother's funeral. The day she returned, I was on morning supervision. She intentionally stepped in front of me and stretched her neck back to look me in the eye. Standing tall and firm, hands by her side, a huge smile lit her beautiful round face, and she declared, "I'm back!!" I knelt down, gave her a hug and said, "Yes you are, and we're so glad!" She skipped away, her life balanced again.

I reach the older students. They aren't as ready to 'divulge all' as younger students will, but we chat and touch base.

"Dad is worried that if we don't get the crops in he won't be able to support our family."
My heart breaks, wondering what struggles he brings to school and whether his worries affect his ability to focus. It's a heavy load for a grade 8 student. I acknowledge his concerns.

"I'm sorry it's hard for you right now. I'm sure you are doing everything you can to help your dad." It doesn't change anything, but he knows he's been heard.

The bell rings and I walk to the basketball court – the best vantage point for watching students use the 'upstairs' and 'downstairs' school entrances. For the most part, I enjoy supervision. Being an exceptionally small school, I get contact time and relationship-building time with most students. At very least, each child is greeted by name before they walk into school. I try to be in the moment and value the three of six mornings we spend together. Some days, concerns around what I need to do, what hasn't been done, and being pulled in three ways – as a teacher, principal, or learning resource teacher – override the joy of morning supervision.

Walking into school, I think about my grade 5 and 6 class. I teach Math and ELA from 9:00 to 11:45. I guard my teaching time, not wanting others' needs and expectations to remove me from class. This doesn't always happen. I would much rather greet them at our classroom door, but supervision, administration and LRT demands rarely provide me the opportunity.

I'm about to walk into class when I remember Hope. She rarely calls, so I know it must be important. I check to see that my students are quietly reading. Yeah! The routine is established. I can sneak in a quick call.

"Hi, Hope. Joyce here. How can I help you?"

"I'm having trouble getting Garrett to school today."

“What’s up?”

“He’s refusing to go to school because he doesn’t want to do the Math game with your grade.” (Hmm – which hat am I wearing for this one – teacher, principal, or LRT?)

Oh dear. I was afraid this would happen. Garrett struggles with change. We had hoped that leading a game would help develop his confidence and social skills, but we’ve pushed him out of his comfort zone. It’s a fine balance, moving him through change slowly without him noticing. Like an old rubber band, he can only be stretched a small amount before he breaks.

I take a deep breath and make a quick LRT decision. “Tell him we won’t do it now, but will wait until his regular EA returns and discuss it then.”

“I told him, but he won’t believe me. He thinks we planned this and is convinced that as soon as he gets back to school, you’ll force him to do it. He’s sitting here in underwear, knowing I won’t send him to school this way. He isn’t going to change his mind today.”

“So, tell me what he needs.” Hope reads Garrett so well. When she suggests we respond in a certain way, I take her advice. I’ve worked hard, maintaining the relationship our previous LRT had established. I now benefit from a high level of trust between her and the school.

“He might as well stay home. He won’t be any good to anyone there. I’ll keep him busy this morning and see if I can get him to come to school this afternoon.”

“Thanks, Hope. You continue to be amazing with your boys. Talk to you later.”

I walk the 20 steps back to my classroom. My students’ 15 minute silent reading time is over. I’ve missed the opportunity to check their day planners - one more thing to do during my admin time. The morning goes well. I am excited with a new strategy I’m trying in ELA. Preparing my students for a year-end trip to Batoche, a provincial historic site recognizing the Métis and the Riel Rebellion, I’ve found a video that discusses various aspects of the Métis

culture. After each section, students find a new partner, practice effective communication skills and share what they learned. Moving into a talking circle, we review aspects of Métis culture learned today. We finish going twice around the circle when the bell rings. Recess already!

I reflect on how twenty plus years have changed my teaching strategies. Power point and SMART board presentations, group discussions, computer assignments and movement and sound have replaced lectures, overheads, (O.K., gestetner handouts) and quietly sitting in desks.

I consider a quick staffroom break when April walks toward me, looking distraught.

“Ed called. He wants to come to school right now and talk to you.”

“Can you call him back and say I can’t leave my class, but will gladly see him at 11:45. Any idea what it’s about?”

“No. He sounds really upset and wants to talk with you right now.”

“Sorry, I just can’t leave class. Tell him I’ll be ready at 11:45. Thanks.”

Once again, I move toward the staffroom. David, who stays in to reduce outside recess stresses, corners me.

“Are we going to talk now?”

“Sorry Dave. It will have to wait until this afternoon. Thanks for remembering we need to talk. Keep reminding me so I don’t forget.”

“O.K.”

The bell rings. The staffroom will wait until lunch. My students are excited – math is in the computer lab! They use their own photographs to illustrate, name and label angles through a power point. I remind them to follow the assignment guidelines before they add the fun details.

Ed arrives at 11:30. April's desk centered between the computer lab and library gives me a perfect vantage point to see him arrive. He is visibly upset. I take 10 steps from my class and greet him.

"Hi, Ed. I still have 15 minutes before class is over. Would you like to wait in my office?"

His eyes dart around. "Can I wait in the staff room? I don't want my kids to see me."

Fifteen minutes drag by. I wonder what has him so upset. Making sure my class ends on time, I send my students back to class, asking them to wait quietly until Mrs. Lane arrives.

I walk into the staffroom. Ed is not only distraught, he's crying.

"She's left me and I don't know what to do."

The first thing I think is, "I am completely out of my league on this one." I have a mental binder called 'Things I've Never Experienced and Have No Idea What to Do'. This is one of them. I listen to him explain what's happened and his fears for himself and his children.

"I need help. Can we call Karen?"

A number of phone calls later, we track her down. She suggests calling social services and mental health. It's a good idea, but it's lunch hour and offices are closed until 1:00. Ed talks about his childhood experiences, avoiding discussions around what is actually happening.

"I need to talk about other things because it's too much to think about right now."

Lunch time is over. We haven't left my office. I don't have enough lunch to share, so choose to eat after he leaves. Just as we contact social services, Karen walks in. Bless her heart! I don't have to deal with this alone. We continue to talk with Ed and help him put supports in place for his children and himself. Three and a half hours later, he has a plan. Not wanting to explain to his children why he's at school, he leaves quickly before the final bell.

I reflect on what just happened. Small school settings are an amazing phenomenon. Over the past four years we've worked hard with the boys and their parents. They struggle with dreams for their children, and the school's role in supporting them. Amidst those struggles, in crisis, the school is first place he turned for support. Ed didn't know where to go, but trusted us enough to ask for help, and believed that we could help him create a plan. He also assumed we'd be here for him, and that I'd have, give, or make the time he needed. It speaks to the progress we've made establishing a trusting and working relationship.

I emerge from the office, the first time since 11:45. Marion queries, "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine. It's a family issue, nothing to do with me or the school. I need to run to the bathroom, warm up lunch and supervise Kara's students. She has to leave a half hour early and I promised to cover her class. I'll talk to staff after school to catch you up."

David is waiting with Karen.

"Mrs. D., can we talk now?"

"Dave, I'm so sorry. I have to supervise Mrs. Lane's class. Will you be O.K. not meeting with me today?"

"Yeah." I know he isn't happy.

"Dave, where's the smile?"

He flashes me a huge smile, bouncing away. Today is a good day and the waiting doesn't bother him. He and Karen have talked, so he's in a good frame of mind.

Karen brings balance to my day, mentoring me through student, parent and staff support strategies, and walking me through personal struggles. We talk about David's orange jumpsuit.

"I'm struggling with how to tell Dave his clothes choice isn't a good one."

"How are things working out with the adult coach idea?"

“Really well. Not everyone on staff was comfortable with it, but I’ve been insisting on using consistent language. We’ve been saying, “As your adult coach, this is what I’m seeing,” describing the behaviour, explaining the social circumstances and working it through from there.

“Good. Now, can you see yourself adding what he wears to your coaching?”

Why didn’t I think of that? It’s the same strategy and is a natural transition from what we’re doing. This could work exceptionally well when David and his EA take their noon walks.

“I can make that work.”

I race into Kara’s class. She’s left, and her students are quietly working. I sit down for a few minutes of quiet time, supervise and finish my lunch. I explain why I am eating. They don’t mind. I watch Tracey, remembering what happened yesterday.

I was in my office, catching up on admin work. Hearing a sound, I knew it was Tracey’s heartfelt sobbing. With her arm gently draped across Tracey’s shoulder, Mary guided her to my office saying, “Tracey is sad right now and could use some time with you.” Stretching out my arms, Tracey ran around my desk, crawled onto my lap and sobbed. Her crying slowed; she started moving and began to talk about why she was sad. We worked out a plan to spend time together when she needed it. As I thought about this little girl with ‘big hurts, I wrote:

*She runs to me
with open arms
sobbing,
Curls on my lap –
foetal
heart broken
“Nobody loves me!”
and my heart breaks.*

*She needs time
and love.
I can give her both.*

We paint and read about horses.

*stories
pictures
talk about
calming
soothing*

We can laugh again.

She is ready.

January 20, 2010

For some reason, Tracey and I have connected. She struggles with reading social cues and appropriate social responses, but mostly she hurts. Though she believes that anger, a learned response, effectively works for her, her classmates don't feel the same. Mary and I are part of a team who devise strategies to support her growth. This will be long term. Change will be slow. Developing relationships will help change happen.

I look up and see two minutes remaining before bell time. The day quickly ends, and students race out with their singsong, "See you tomorrow". Student noises, sounds that bring life to our school, fade away and the building is silent.

My day isn't over. I slowly walk to my office, reflect on my day and get ready to check e-mails, complete some admin paperwork, write my admin report for tonight's SCC meeting and prep for my sub tomorrow. Marion, Dave's EA, pokes her head into my office.

"Were you even here today?" she laughs. I laugh back.

"You know. Sitting in my office, eating chocolates. Same old."

"Dave had a good day, but was wondering why you didn't meet with him."

"I know. I feel bad. I'm not here tomorrow, either. Maybe you, he and I can meet the next day? He wants to talk about something new for his 'time out' box. I think it's a good idea. If it's not serving a purpose, we need to re-evaluate what might work and all be on the same page with what he will do instead."

“Sounds good. He saw that you were busy. He was just disappointed.”

“We’ll make it work. Thanks for helping him deal with it.”

“No problem. See you the day after tomorrow. Enjoy your day tomorrow.”

“You bet. Have a good evening.”

She’s right. I didn’t see anyone today. I have complete confidence that staff can deal with issues as they arise so never worry about things falling apart when I’m not there. Though they know I trust and support how they handle situations, issues are often left for me to deal with. I have to work at their leadership self-confidence. It’s there; they just need to trust themselves.

My heart stops. Today’s Math lesson for Janice is sitting on my desk. I never did touch base with her. I know EAs must not instruct without teacher plans – her doing so goes against everything I believe. Her ability to adapt and creatively review saved my skin today. I owe her.

I hear laughter coming from the staffroom and decide to re-connect. I walk in. Talking stops. It usually does when I walk in. I’ve stopped worrying about staff not wanting me to hear the conversation. Their reaction is a reflection on how I update them: fly in, give information, fly out. They’ve learned to stop, let me say my bit then continue after I leave. Today I need to catch them up on the day’s events, but that can wait.

I make a fresh cup of coffee and help myself to a cinnamon bun. They were fresh this morning, sent by a grandma who spoils us with home baking. That’s when I realize it. I forgot to eat lunch! This has been happening more often. It explains my light-headedness and inability to focus. Mmm - nothing like a dual fix of caffeine and sugar. I pick a sunny, warm spot on the couch, and relish the opportunity to relax and listen to stories I missed from the day.

“So, what happened today?” Tom queries, “We weren’t sure if you needed rescuing.”

Sharing details around Ed’s visit, I learn that staff had a discussion, concerned with the

length of time I was ‘holed up’ in my office. Karen’s appearance and calls from social services alleviated their concerns for my welfare, but left them troubled with the seriousness of his crisis. Understanding their ‘behind the lines’ concerns I am humbled, yet not surprised with their care and support. It’s what we do – back each other – sometimes invisibly.

I look up and notice that an hour has passed. Shocked, I excuse myself, and head back to my office. I have two hours to deal with e-mails, prep for tomorrow and prepare my admin report for the 7:00 School Community Council (SCC) meeting. The transformation from local school boards to SCCs has been an interesting process.

“I would like to look at ways you can support us with our literacy goals.” SCCs are asked to take a new role, supporting school goals and the LIP. Principals have been asked to help guide the process. Struggling to define our roles, where they can support rather than define or control school activities is an interesting balance.

As a lengthy discussion around school fees ensues, I reflect on building relationships. The SCC has supportive with ‘doing’ activities: supervising at lunch for teacher appreciation days, upgrading the playground, preparing lunch for sport tournaments and organizing winter carnival. I grieve my inability to create a team of nine members who feel free to speak and are given the opportunity to use their strengths. Differing values among some SCC members and me affect my ability to establish an effective working relationship. I respect their input but am also aware of power struggles. Building relationships with all SCC members has not been easy.

Nine-thirty – the meeting is over. Kara and I debrief the meeting and get ready to go home. At ten o’clock I pack my bags (though I wonder why since I won’t open them before morning), check to make sure I have enough sunflower seeds to keep me awake while I drive, and head home. Ironically, a talk show about the significance of building positive relationships

is on my favourite radio station. I connect with the guest and reflect on my own day of building relationships, trying to meet everyone's needs, struggling with meeting my own and finding time to get everything done.

Connecting: Building Relationships



*Today she connected with Carrie
cats
drawings
chatted
celebrated
So much fun.*

*And Natasha
has bought into reading
a virtue for determination!*

*And Tracey hasn't needed her forever
though 'surrounded by shorts and capris'.*

*If she has to choose
she will always
err on the side of students.*

*Connecting,
Establishing relationships*

Being present.

April 28, 2010

Building relationships, a theme constructed from my research, supported what I

intuitively believed to be true. I not only understand the importance of, but actively engage in establishing positive working and personal relationships. My history as teacher and teaching principal in small and exceptionally small rural schools may be a factor in my perceived role. Developing relationships is ‘what I do’ and what I believe I should do. This year, I built relationships with four distinct groups: students, school staff, parents and community members, and division staff. Twenty five of fifty students requiring support, changes in staff numbers and dynamics, an evolving community culture and connection to division staff required more time and energy than in past years. Time needed for relationship building with students, staff and parents, left little for community and division relationships.

Of significant interest is the impact building and maintaining these relationships had on my job as a teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school. The theme, building relationships, provides partial answers to my first two thesis questions, How does the context of an exceptionally small rural school impact upon a teaching principal’s role(s)? and How do stakeholder expectations (school staff, community, division, ministry) impact a teaching principal’s roles and responsibilities in an exceptionally small rural school?

Building Relationships with Students

Relationships explain why I take 40 minutes helping Aaron and Harry work things out, why I spend time with Tracey, and explain who I am and how I view my work world. Relationships take energy and time, and most people don’t get that (June 15, 2010).

Building relationships with students was an integral part of my job, necessary in my roles as teacher, principal, and LRT. This topic in the context of a teaching principal’s role is lacking in research. I question whether there is an assumption that establishing relationships naturally occurs in a teaching principal’s role, and is therefore not viewed as unique. My research

reinforced what I intuitively felt – that time spent building relationships with students correlated with my ability to work with and support student needs.

Though my teacher role identifies with the literature suggesting that teachers who know their students well create a school environment where students feel a sense of belonging (Cotton, 2002; McRobbie, 1990) and experience less alienation and increased resiliency, I argue that as a teaching principal, efforts I spent establishing positive relationships equally created a sense of belonging. My research confirmed the significance I placed on connecting with students:

I know that learning is important, but connections are what it's all about. Everything else is secondary. I'm not naïve enough to think I connect with every child, but I believe every child connects with someone in our school, and that's important. (June 11, 2010)

So, why me? Could I not have asked another person on staff to build relationships?

In reality, everyone worked at it. The difference was the time spent, how we connected based on our individual personalities and the fact that I was representing three roles: teacher, principal and LRT. A description that small schools do not simplify and standardize students, but address their minds and hearts (Meier, 1996) resonates with my belief around the necessity of building relationships with students. Our exceptionally small school has allowed me as a teacher and principal to play a strong role in developing students' well-being and secure sense of self:

So, if I'm to reflect on my job, it has a huge people/student component. If I've done anything well, it's been to meet kids where they are, especially around behaviour and family needs issues. I think I'm quite understanding and willing to bend. I know that frustrates the heck out of some people, especially those who are cut and dry, but I still prefer to err on the side of compassion. I know I will always err on the side of doing for and connecting with kids over any other thing I have to do (May 16, 2010).

Choosing to spend time with students took me away from instructional leadership, LRT, managerial, and teacher duties. I spent the morning supporting Dave through an anxiety attack, and monitoring him in my classroom until he was able to return to his (March 1, 2010). A grade 3 student successfully managing her anger outbursts would have colouring time with me. One day, rather than colour, she decided to play outside. It was the *“type of job I want[ed] to work myself out of”* (February 5, 2010). Building a relationship led to effective discussions. We decided that a ‘good day’ would be one where she might be mad on the inside but could handle it and not disrupt the class. She sadly replied, *“just disruption in my heart”* (January 21, 2010). My heart broke to hear her say it, but spending time with her moved her forward.

A new immigrant student having difficulty finding dragon colouring pages, asked me for help. I spent 15 minutes of administration time searching for pictures. He could have searched on his own, but I appreciated him asking me. *“Sometimes doing something for the sake of a visit and talking is reason enough”* (April 30, 2010). It was an opportunity for us to connect and talk ‘just because’.

A grade 3 student brought a ‘two big slivers’ crisis to my office. Hesitant to remove them (needles and children’s hands make me nervous) I asked if it could wait until she got home. The student looked at me and said, “But I trust you.” That statement did more to confirm why I spend time and energy developing relationships than any assessment I have ever done.

Standing in front of me, slowly running her hand up and down the ruffles on the front of my shirt, I wondered what Amanda wanted. The touch felt very personal, leaving me to wonder if I should find a gentle way to stop her. Though slightly uncomfortable for me, there were no suggestions to her actions. I realized she was just a little girl finding a way to connect with me. She looked up and softly spoke.

“Can I colour with you next Tuesday?”

“Mmm – it’s been a long time, hasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s talk to Mrs. Smith and see if we can make it work.” Watching her eyes light up, I knew I had made the right decision. I became aware of that critical part of my job – connections and building student relationships – and equally aware of the struggles, angers, frustrations, and deep down sorrows through which we guide them (June 11, 2010).

Being easy to find played a role in my ability to establish relationships in our exceptionally small rural school. That was especially important in helping three groups manage their ‘friends this morning, enemies this afternoon’ friendships. After helping them set goals, it was their responsibility to touch base and give me a ‘one to ten’ on how successful they were managing. I would find them waiting on my steps (May 28, 2010) or reminding me that it was Wednesday, our meeting day.

“What a great day! I don’t know if I get a ‘fix’ on days like today, but I love it when I have to do lots of people problem solving” (May 13, 2010). Though I enjoyed the opportunity, helping students develop and maintain relationships often occurred during my administration time. This resulted in completing managerial responsibilities after school hours.

Being a teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school, I knew my students well. I was aware of their interests, gifts, challenges, struggles, and knew how they best learned (Meier, 1996). This allowed me to adapt activities to match their gifts and talents. A student auditioned with a karaoke song for a school fundraiser. *“She was so bad, I was nervous about her embarrassing herself”* (May 19, 2010). Taking advantage of her acting and reading

abilities, I asked her to read a story. She completely ‘bought into’ the audience looking at scanned pictures as she read. What a success! *“Good call, Joyce!”* (May 19, 2010).

Though teachers in small schools are addressed in literature as knowing their students well (Meier, 1996), not discussed is a necessity for LRTs and principals to have the same knowledge. With each role, another aspect of a student’s life was revealed. As a teaching principal, I had information that I as a teacher may not have been privy to. Knowing Garrett as principal, teacher and LRT, I was able to advocate for his needs at all levels. I knew he was embarrassed with his inability to read, he faked learning and would not let other grade 6 students see his struggles. Establishing a relationship with Garrett and understanding his needs was the reason I told my student service coordinator that, *“I haven’t given up on him yet and don’t plan to start now”* (June 4, 2010). A letter to a medical specialist, writing a ‘Background, Rationale and Recommendations’ report’ (BRR) with my school counselor, and phone calls between my superintendent and student service coordinator ensured that Garrett receive a half time EA. I was so thrilled, I *“got teary-eyed, knowing that things are in place”* (June 24, 2010).

Knowing Garrett and establishing a relationship also allowed me, as a teaching principal in my LRT role, to individualize his programming. We implemented a work experience program to support him with life skills. I created a life skills math program based on his favourite vehicle. It was so successful he *“took it home last night. That’s a great thing, because I’m sure he hasn’t taken work home in the longest time...too cool...”* (January 21, 2010).

Our exceptionally small rural school has given me the opportunity to know my students, their lives and situations extremely well (Meier, 1996), perhaps at times too well. Parents sharing out-of-school information about children let me know my students well, but gave me more information, albeit humorous at times, than what I required to do my job well. A parent

called to inform me that, at an out-of-school event, a student had put her son's shorts in the toilet (April 15, 2010). Another call gave me details around why a student was grounded (March 8, 2010). As much as I questioned the necessity in me knowing these details, it was not uncommon for out-of-school problems to carry into school. Knowing situations about students' lives outside the school setting helped me understand in-school student dynamics.

Connecting with students out of school was important for establishing relationships. Brian had been faithfully informing me of his hockey home games. Most students in my class played on his team, so watching gave me an opportunity to see them in another setting (March 3). Jarrod skating behind the hockey net, looking up, and using hand signals to say, 'I see you' helped me understand that relationship-building occurs outside the school setting as well.

Building student relationships in an exceptionally small rural school takes on a feeling of connection and knowing. Developing relationships with staff in an exceptionally small rural school setting is equally important.

Building Relationships with Staff

Upon arriving at my current school, the first question I asked teachers and support staff was, "What do you need from me?" Their response was, "Honesty". The school was in crisis. That one word clearly spoke to what they valued, and what was missing in their relationship with administration. I knew that building a positive work environment and strong staff relationships would be fundamental to my success as a teaching principal.

The literature discussing teaching principals' roles with teachers focuses on instructional leadership, and is comprised of curriculum development (Wilson & McPake, 2000) and teacher supervision (Chance & Lindgren, 1989; Starr & White, 2008). Though research specifically addressing teaching principal's role in building strong work and personal relationships is lacking,

the necessity of staff collegiality in building a school community is addressed (Jimerson, 2006; McRobbie, 1990; Meier, 1996, Murdock & Schiller, 2002).

Building staff relationships in an exceptionally small rural school to some extent occurs naturally. Research addressing improved teacher attitude and staff morale through informal staff discussions (Wilson & McPake, 2000) rings true with me. Informal discussion in our school covered every genre: complaints, frustrations, laughter, planning, organizing, sharing ideas, and relaxing (January 11, 2010; June 9, 2010). Though it often meant me staying later than I had planned, being present was an important aspect to relationship building.

Because connecting during school hours was difficult, after-school chats and sharing often took place in my office (January 11, 2010; February 4, 2010; February 23, 2010). Supporting staff and maintaining positive relationships through decreasing staff numbers is an issue not addressed in research. Camaraderie was balanced with challenges and frustrations associated with a decrease in staff numbers and expectations around maintaining programs, extracurricular activities, and increased division accountability. I was challenged to change ‘we’ve always done it this way’ supervision, workloads, and extracurricular activities to help teachers with increased demands on their time. Questioning my principal’s role, I wrote:

What do I need to be doing to support them...and can I do anything more? I try to say where I’m at and how I’m feeling so they don’t feel like they’re in it on their own, but maybe that gives them permission to be frustrated and less tolerant (January 27, 2010).

Though teamwork was a trait our school celebrated, my greatest staff-based challenge occurred when staff behaviours did not support our team philosophy. Working collaboratively takes time (May 5, 2010). Small staffs do not have the luxury of not agreeing with another

person on staff, yet disagreements do happen. Encouraging staff to follow our code of ethics, talking directly to the person involved (January 27), did not necessarily lead to positive results.

Becoming aware of tense staff interactions, I struggled with how to bring us back together. *“It’s the first time in the three and a half years I’ve been here that we haven’t worked together, that people have taken a stand”* (January 11, 2010). We had always managed to put aside personal agendas and keep students in the forefront of our decision making. I agonized over how to deal with the change. Staff did not see themselves becoming less flexible and adaptable (May 14). *“The sad thing is that I don’t feel (they) see or understand they are digging in their heels more and more”* (May 14, 2010). Increased demands on staff time meant more mediation and ‘talk time’ demands placed on me. A teacher discussing concerns about staff not working as a team or supporting our school’s principles and values (February 4, 2010) and meeting over supper before an SCC meeting allowed connecting time where *“we had a good talk and shared stuff about students we haven’t had time to share”* (June 2, 2010).

During this period of staff’s change in attitude, I looked at the angel statue. She looked so sad, draped over the world, or in my mind, draped over the staff. I wrote:

*Today she grieves
the loss of solidarity -
a rift
inward thinking
decisions made and fought for on the basis of self
rather than on students as done in the past.*

*Today she grieves
and feels the change
grieves issues unresolved.*

*Today she grieves
the strength of the “I”
and the loss of the “we”.*

Does she trust in tomorrow?

Does she trust in resolution?

Will trust and unity be restored?

... first she must grieve...

January 11, 2010

Balanced with efforts to support staff through struggles were times we exemplified team. Helping and supporting each other was embedded in our school culture. My experiences with staff camaraderie are supported by research indicating that staffs supporting each other, knowing each other well, using each other's strengths, developing positive working relationships and friendships is greater in an exceptionally small school (Dunning, 1993; Wilson & McPake, 2000). Though at times I felt isolated in my roles and decision making, I knew staff always 'had my back'. Helping the SLC prepare for a food sale, I was absent from lunch supervision. Tom just stepped in and supervised my lunch hour and detention time. *"Thank goodness....staff helped everything get done (without me asking)"* (February 12, 2010). In another instance, after being confined to my office by upset parents, a teacher called to say I was needed, giving me a valid excuse to remove myself from the discussion (December 18, 2010). This support reflected the positive working and personal relationships we shared.

Our deeper relationships provided a safety net for shared personal experiences crises and celebrations. This not only led to friendships, but provided me flexibility to make informed school-based decisions and to treat staff compassionately. Awareness of a spouse's medical condition, pregnancy complications (April 22, 2010), impending surgery and a sudden hospital admission (April 15, 2010) a friend's sudden death (February 1, 2010), a spouse receiving a provincial award and a teacher's child in a provincial sport playoff helped me provide emotional and classroom support when the need arose.

My angel statue draped over the world also reflected positive times with staff:

“within the wall we are OK”

...my favourite mantra...

*Because when we step back from
SMART goals
PPPs
LIPs
CIFs and all external expectations*

*We define and re-define
question
challenge
change
grow
and help make child-best decisions that help students
define and re-define
question
challenge
change and grow.*

*We are four teachers:
quadrants that make us whole.*

*We understand unity.
We understand putting aside our self for all.
We define team.*

December 15, 2010

Developing positive relationships with students and staff was important for in-school relationships. Exceptionally small schools are also closely connected to parents and the community at large. Working at these relationships could not be ignored.

Building Relationships with Parents and Community

Teaching principals play a role in establishing relationships with community (Bryant, 2007; Budge, 2006; Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Ewington et al., 2008). Establishing relationships gives teaching principals the opportunity to know students and families better, thus creating a strong sense of community (Chance & Segura, 2009; Martin & Yin, 1999; Ralph, 2003). My experiences parallel research. I would not describe establishing relationships with parents and

community as a leadership role, but a necessity. Building positive relationships helped me ensure that school-based activities and initiatives would be supported. Time and energy invested in building positive relationships was reinforced by a mom's response to a decision I made concerning her child. She called, saying she appreciated having a copy of the schedule, and would *"like it to continue for a few months"* (March 15, 2010).

Investing in positive relationships with parents and community was a conscious decision. I helped create these relationships by engaging parents and community members in school events and spending direct contact time with parents of students receiving special support. Building community relationships, I involved community members in school activities. This was accomplished in my dual role as principal initiating and supporting activities, and teacher in charge of the SLC working with students to organize and advertise events. Connecting into the community through recycling programs, town clean-up activities and the Terry Fox run helped our school be seen in the community. A school-based Family Literacy Day brought the community into our school. Twenty alumni, parents and community members read to our 50 students (January 27, 2010). Our SCCs assisted in organizing a weekly 'grandparents read' program, connecting seniors to students, and providing reading incentives. Blending traditional and new school activities, an afternoon senior tea became a community tea and fundraiser for Haiti relief. *"I love days like this – it always brings out the best in kids. For the most part, kids are in a good mood, have fun. We had lots of parents there, which is always awesome"* (May 13, 2010). Bringing community members into the school helped develop positive relationships.

After a tiring, but fun winter carnival, I connected my feelings about making community connections to my angel:

Today she is tired but content.

*A day of good things...
The senior hockey team with us
at our winter carnival –*

*Kids connecting –
special people
bonding.*

*She can pat herself on the back –
It was her idea
and is building into literacy
and why learning is important*

It's all good.

March 15, 2010

Involving our senior hockey team was supported by staff and our SCC. It brought the community into our school and provided positive role models for students.

Though I identify with research around teaching principals feeling pressure to participate in and attend local activities such as curling (Ralph, 2003), they were not negative experiences. Growing up in small towns, I understood the importance of attending community events. I was informed of activities, yet felt little pressure to attend. I believe I experienced less pressure because I lived 80 kilometers from school. Distance did not deter me from establishing connecting at a community level. I attended a Relay for Life fundraiser (April 30, 2010), a community fowl supper and the communities' 100th anniversary celebrations.

Though I enjoyed watching students outside of school, I was also conscious that parents viewed my attendance in a positive light. One evening I took a break from office work to eat supper at the hockey rink. It gave me an opportunity to see students and parents in a new setting. *"I watched until 6:30. (One student) has been telling me about his games for a while, so decided to take a few minutes to do that."* (March 3, 2010). Judging a 4-H speech contest (January 22, 2010) was an excellent opportunity to make community connections and allowed me to see students in a different setting.

Developing one-on-one parent-school relationships to support student needs is an aspect of community expectations I met with great success. Though not addressed in the literature, a theme of developing relationships with parents was relevant in my setting. Twenty five of 50 students receiving speech language therapy, English as an Alternate Language, counselor or educational psychologist support, and modified and alternate academic programming, may have been unique to our school. Relationship-building and regular communication between the school and parents was vital for students' successes. Working at relationships occurred in my LRT, teacher and principal roles.

A time and energy intensive process provided needed documentation to transition a student into an alternate school. The student's mother called me to say the transfer had been approved. Asking if her child knew, she said I had to tell him because "*he trusted I would do so as soon as I knew*" (June 7, 2010) and she did not want to break that trust. This not only illustrates the relationship I had developed with her, but the respect she had for the relationship I had developed with her child.

Strong relationships with parents lead to collaborative decision making processes between parents and me. One student with medical issues would frequently ask to go home. Calling the mother to have her make the decision was an important process because it took "*the decision making out of our hands and helped him see his mom as an ally*" (January 28, 2010). After giving me a hug, the mother thanked me and "*said it was good to have someone understand her kids and not have them suspended every time something happened*" (May 5, 2010). I developed a relationship by recognizing her role in supporting her child and consistency supported the process. She understood the school's commitment to her and her child and willingly supported us in turn.

A student refused to attend our track and field meet. Discussing various options, his parents and I determined that he would be most successful by helping rather than participating in events. Raking sand pits, replacing the high jump bar, and helping younger students, he was involved in the track meet for the first time in three years (May 3, 2010). The relationship with his parents changed a potentially difficult situation into one that was successful.

Establishing positive relationships with parents provided room for forgiveness. I completed my teacher report cards, forgot to do Garrett's LRT report. Calling his mom, she laughed and said, "*at least you remembered*" (January 22, 2010). Potential for a stressful situation was quickly resolved. I completed his report card and delivered it to her house.

I also made mistakes. A school incident required contact with a student's parents. Knowing the parents were not home, I phoned the emergency contact. Forgetting to call the parents, they learned of the incident through a secondary source. Expressing their concern, I completely agreed saying, "*it was a mistake on my part and reassured them that (should it be necessary) I would be sure to call*" (March 1, 2010). I knew I was responsible for re-establishing a trust relationship.

I consciously prioritized time and energy spent developing relationships. Students and staff received the most time. Parents, SCC, and community relationships followed. School division personnel received the limited time remaining.

Building Relationships with the School Division

Building relationships with school division personnel is not unique to exceptionally small rural schools, but lack of time and opportunity for face-to-face interactions created issues around not feeling heard and supported. This issue added to other job-related stresses, exacerbated my frustrations and challenges around being compliant, and once again left me questioning my role

as a teaching principal in the division (February 8, 2010). Building relationships was also difficult because it felt, at times, that my efforts were not reciprocated. *“They don’t get the connecting. Part of me struggles with the dynamics of what’s provided by the school division. If I had the opportunity to work with them (in another capacity) I’d talk about relationships and what it takes to be in relationship”* (June 15, 2010).

The literature does not address establishing relationships with division senior administration as a teaching principal’s role, yet positive working relationships with division staff played a significant role in my ability to move through division processes and expectations. In-school visits were limited to our division computer expert and maintenance man, our student services coordinator, and area superintendent. Relationships were established through phone calls, e-mails, or at principals’ meetings.

My best division relationship was with my new area superintendent. Though I seldom saw him, he supported the relationship by judiciously responding to phone calls and e-mails, and always ending with a positive comment. After sharing concerns during one of our rare in-school meetings, I wrote that it was, *“the first time this year I was comfortable initiating a conversation with my superintendent and felt safe to say what I wanted”* (December 17, 2010).

I worked hard at improving my working relationship with our student service coordinator. That relationship was initially necessary to ensure my high need students received support they required. As the year progressed, it evolved into a relationship of mutual respect (June 10, 2010). It was the best year I had working with and feeling supported by this person.

Building relationships with division staff was not easy. I believe not seeing them was significant. With those who came to school, I had the opportunity to develop a positive working relationship and felt successful in being heard and supported in our school needs. Connecting to

division staff is an expectation that I believe is unique for exceptionally small rural schools and comes from the tradition of smaller school divisions prior to amalgamations in 2006. A change from a smaller division that had a family atmosphere to a large division that feels business based has not only been a difficult transition, but has left me unsure of how to establish relationships and feel connected to senior administration.

Conclusion

I am struck by the significance of the theme ‘building relationships’ in my research and the contrast with what is articulated in the literature about small schools. Establishing relationships with students, staff, parents, community and division staff in my roles as teaching principal and LRT was fundamental to my job and unique in to an exceptionally small school context, where expectations of connection and ‘knowing each other’ are central to people’s interactions. Exceptionally small rural schools having a reputation of school as a family or community connects with establishing relationships.

All stakeholders have an expectation of positive relationships, with the type of relationship unique to each group – students, staffs, parents, communities and division staff. My challenge was taking time to develop these relationships. A second challenge was determining whether I would develop the relationship that was expected. I would help staff, but not enable as some may have hoped. I was visible in the community, but perhaps less than what they had expected. I built relationships with students, but not where some students were favoured over others.

I continue to view building and maintaining positive relationships with all stakeholders as a teaching principal’s primary role. Unique to an exceptionally small rural school setting was

my opportunity to know students and families extremely well. This helped me in all three roles – teacher, principal, and LRT – ensuring our school was doing our best to meet student needs.

Autoethnography has given me an opportunity to understand myself better and deepen my understanding of others (Ellis, 2004). My research reinforced a personal quality I inherently believed to be true – that connecting with people and establishing relationships not only fundamentally describes how I perceive my world, but directly connects to my roles as an LRT - teaching principal in an exceptionally small rural school.

Chapter 7

Putting Together the Pieces

My thesis was framed by the question, How does the context of an exceptionally small, rural school impact upon a teaching principal's role(s)? and was guided by the sub-questions How do stakeholder expectations (school staff, community, division, Ministry) impact a teaching principal's roles and responsibilities in an exceptionally small rural school? and What challenges and opportunities does a teaching principal face in an exceptionally small rural school?

Though there were specific data which addressed my research questions, I noted significant overlap in ideas. In particular, the impact of fractured roles blanketed all aspects of my research. This will be addressed below as I briefly address each research question.

In response to the first question, responsibilities associated with fractured roles were directly related to my exceptionally small rural school context. Staff cuts, a decrease in student population, and a school division staffing formula requiring formal implementation of various roles resulted in me taking on more than one position. I was required to have expert knowledge and fulfill duties associated with three distinct roles: teacher, principal and learning resource teacher, statistically a 1.529 position.

Also unique to my exceptionally small rural school context was the extent to which I became aware of and was involved in student, parent and family lives within and outside the school setting. This knowledge influenced how I fulfilled duties associated with my three roles and the time required to meet various needs. I understood and reacted to family situations that impacted students' learning, and took time from my roles to help deal with family problems. Developing strong, positive relationships was instrumental to my role.

Stakeholder expectations significantly impacted my teaching principal roles and responsibilities. The existence of expectations from school community council (SCC) and community, parents, students, and school division was not unique to my school context. Of significant impact to my roles in our exceptionally small rural school were SCC and School Division expectations set with larger schools in mind. Not given the opportunity to meet expectations in ways more suited to a small school setting challenged my ability to successfully fulfill my duties.

Fractured roles compounded challenges associated with student, staff, SCC and community and School Division expectations. Responding to unique expectations associated with each role required an inordinate amount of time developing relationships and completing necessary paperwork. I was challenged to be compliant to our School Division yet honour our exceptionally small school's capacity to meet expectations.

Challenges and opportunities associated with a teaching principal's roles in an exceptionally small rural school guided my third research question. The impact of fracture roles was significant in this context. Lack of time – a managerial aspect – challenged my ability to successfully balance tasks associated with all roles. Lack of time led to a situation where I responded to expectations on an 'as needed' basis, not giving any one role adequate time to complete tasks competently. Demands associated with developing parent relationships and school goals, supporting staff, working with students, completing LRT paper work and responding to 'slipstream syndrome' (Dunning, 1993) left me little time to develop specific skill sets associated with my various roles.

This in turn led to a professional challenge. With no extra time to fulfill expectations associated with increased demands, I began to not only question my abilities as a teacher and

principal, but whether I ‘belonged’ in the profession. I was focused on what I could not get done such that I lost sight of my strengths. Feelings of inadequacy left me concerned that staff, colleagues and senior administration would perceive me as incompetent.

Amid challenges, two distinct opportunities were apparent. First, my understanding of the LRT position was enhanced. Though I had previously worked closely with our LRT, being responsible for all aspects of the role helped me develop a new appreciation for what the job entailed. A second opportunity supported an aspect of my job I have always enjoyed – seeing the ‘big picture’. Having direct information specific to the three roles provided me a greater understanding of student needs and general school functioning.

Though a teaching principal’s role is not unique, the amount of teaching time, administration time, and expectations associated with the roles are unique in an exceptionally small school context. Adding the learning resource teacher role to my teaching principal role further fractured the roles and compounded the job’s complexity through increased challenges in workload, time needed to develop relationships, and capacity to meet expectations.

Implications for the Teaching Principal’s Fractured Role

I did not plan to write a thesis. Attending a Saskatchewan School Based Administrators’ workshop, I was challenged with the question, “What is your professional passion?” My research idea was born from my long standing curiosity about teaching principals’ experiences in small rural schools. Though my experiences as a teaching principal paralleled research, interpretations of my experiences led to fractured roles, an extension to current research about ‘role duality’ and the ‘slipstream syndrome’ (Dunning, 1993).

‘What, so what, now what’ (Driscoll, 2010) is a reflective process currently prevalent in education. ‘What’ is that I was a learning resource teacher-teaching principal in an exceptionally

small rural school. I balanced these three roles, a 1.529 FTE position, within the confines of a full time position. ‘So what’ – how I felt and what it meant to me – became clear through my journals and daily ‘what I do’ log. Meeting all needs associated with these roles took a toll on my time and energy. The roles contributed to my feelings of inadequacy and a continuous sense of ‘dropping the ball’. I was challenged to perform any role well, and consistently questioned not only my capabilities but whether I was ‘principalship material’. Experiencing the ‘slipstream syndrome’ (Dunning, 1993), where our small school was expected to meet expectations more suited to larger schools, added to my feelings of inadequacy and not being heard by stakeholders.

The ‘now what’ considers implications for my research and what it means in practice. I believe that division and ministry policy makers misunderstand or may not be aware of the professional and personal implications of external expectations on teaching principals. Senior administration could benefit from providing a trusting environment for teaching principals to voice concerns. Senior administration spending significant time in schools could give them a greater understanding of teaching principals’ work environments. Principals could benefit from being heard and sharing their lived experiences.

Though senior administration must also respond to external demands and expectations, it is important that they consider the impact of similar external expectations on teaching principals’ roles in exceptionally small schools. This could be accomplished by senior administration reviewing current ‘one size fits all’ (Dunning, 1993) practices in respect to teaching principals and fractured roles. Through discussions with their superintendent, teaching principals from exceptionally small schools should be afforded the flexibility of adapting policies and expectations to better suit their school context. Staffing schools by need rather than a ‘one size

fits all' formula could increase the number of professional staff. Principals' teaching time would be reduced, giving them more time to deal with increased demands and expectations.

Colleagues' questions, such as, "What makes your school any different from the others?" and their perceptions that teachers and teaching principals require the same skill sets led me to believe there is misunderstanding about what is required of teaching principals in exceptionally small schools. Skills unique to teaching principals include supervising professional and support staff, developing school vision and goals, working with the community, balancing fractured roles, building team, establishing relationships and classroom teaching. Awareness of teaching principals' needs and work situation could assist senior administration in developing induction programs for new principals. I transitioned from teacher to high school teaching principal, to teaching principal of an exceptionally small school with no special assistance or consideration. Induction programs specific to teaching principals in small schools would give teachers an opportunity to consider their move into administration and assist principals in considering whether an exceptionally small school setting would fit their needs and personality.

With school division amalgamations, administration meetings changed from a 'round table' discussion with seven people and one superintendent to one with 42 principals, a director of education, five superintendents, and other division support staff. Time spent on my fractured roles left me short of time for connecting with other principals. Senior administration developing a mentorship program could give teaching principals working in a small school context an opportunity to share ideas.

When I consider implications to my fractured roles, I am aware of the personal cost. Of significance was a loss of professional confidence at more than one level. As a teacher, I lost confidence in my ability to effectively plan lessons and provide adapted programming.

Administratively, I had difficulty balancing all demands, became forgetful and felt ineffective in my job. As a learning resource teacher I did not have the training required to successfully accomplish all tasks associated with the role. Personal concerns around being viewed as incompetent did little to build faith in my abilities.

Implications for fractured roles extend beyond the education field. Professionals in service professions such as health care and certified athletic trainers (ATs) experience 'role overload'. Work complexity and competing priorities is resulting in increased health-care workers absenteeism, lower productivity and greater staff turnover (Picard, 2010). Athletic trainers similarly experience role overload, where either multiple roles clash, making it difficult to perform or finish workloads in time available, or responsibilities are completed, but not at the same competency level if fewer duties were present (Brumels & Beach, 2008). Stress associated with fractured roles has implications to organizations. It is important that employers be aware of stressors and find ways of promoting and supporting a positive work environment.

As principals are teachers' 'sanity gatekeepers' (Wilson & McPake, 2000), it may be beneficial for senior administration to adopt a similar role for employees. Support can be shown by providing adequate training and personnel support for employees with new and increased workloads. There is value in senior administration assisting with setting priorities, and filtering and balancing division and ministry expectations to make them suitable for small rural schools.

Implications for Research

A lack of current research on exceptionally small rural schools creates opportunities for further research. I will discuss two research possibilities. First, the impact of universal policies on teaching principals in small schools specifically connects to my study. Though not a theme in

my study, I identified emotion as an undercurrent throughout my work. This led me to consider emotion in the teaching principal position as a second research possibility.

Impact of Universal Policies on Teaching Principals in Exceptionally Small Schools

My interpretations of my experiences as a teaching in an exceptionally small rural school illustrated the impact of external expectations on my fractured roles. Ministry and senior administration expectations seem to be written with larger schools in mind and did not consider our exceptionally small school context. I find it fascinating that researchers argue the value of small schools (Ayers, 2000; Cross & Frankcombe, 1994), yet policy-makers do not consider the small school context.

Large schools deliberately built to meet industrial needs and having a managerial, hierarchical and bureaucratic focus are being re-created to emulate small schools perceived as more personal, supportive, and able to promote personal relationships essential for higher levels of learning (Ayers, 2000; Nieto, 2000) . This leads me to question why, if larger schools are being changed to adopt small school culture, policy makers create expectations with larger schools in mind. One research study provides an answer from a principal's perspective: "I get the impression that if you're [a] small [school], people think you can cope... I think we're disadvantaged from a perception point of view. I think we're viewed as so insignificant as to not matter very much" (Starr & White, 2008, p. 5). Further research investigating changes in policy and expectations that recognize an exceptionally small school context could prove to be beneficial. Additionally, research could examine the need for increased financial support to school divisions with a large number of exceptionally small schools.

Research questions that would help clarify concerns around this issue could include: How do current ministry and division policies affect a small school's ability to be seen as unique and

maintain its small school culture? What challenges do small schools face in implementing ‘one size fits all’ policies? How can small schools successfully implement universal policies? and How policies be adapted to recognize and honour a small school context? These questions are equally relevant to other sectors. Our small community, expected to offer health services in the same fashion as larger centers, is dealing with a sudden removal of health care service. Being heard as unique and able to provide services that do not look the same as larger centers, yet fill a need is difficult.

Emotions and Fractured Roles

“The stories we tell give substance, nuance, purpose and legitimacy to our feelings.” (Fineman, 2003, p.17)

Autoethnography provided me the opportunity to delve deeper into understanding my role as a teaching principal. Though I chose not to apply a feminist lens to my research, I noticed that emotion was common to all themes. It led me to consider the impact of emotion on my teaching principal’s roles and the implications to further research. My observation that schools are people, not buildings is extended by research indicating that school life is “characterized by an interplay of competing emotions” (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998, p. 270) where emotional work is at the center of the administrative role (Wallace, 2010). Emotions experienced in the principal’s role, discussed in the literature (Fineman, as quoted in Wallace), paralleled my experiences as a teaching principal. Conflict between completing central office work and addressing ‘people’ issues, or supporting board initiatives that do not follow my personal beliefs, frustration dealing with staff opposed to programs initiated to meet student needs and the joy of a successful school goal were examples true to my situation.

I view myself as an emotional person and acknowledge emotional components to my job, yet my literature review provided limited reflections around how emotions impacted my personal and professional lives. Possible explanations arise from current research. One explanation suggests that conflict is experienced when emotions needed to work with people are denied, not acknowledged (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). A second explanation centers on ‘emotional labour’ (Hoschild, as cited in Sachs & Blackmore), the emotional toll principals experience when creating or hiding feelings to give an appearance others expect to see. A stereotypical expectation of compassion, empathy and understanding can lead to female principals feeling trapped, denying themselves perceived negative emotions such as anger. An added challenge is a belief that being professional is equated with being in control, and therefore not showing emotions.

Emotions were an underlying theme in my research. The limited current research on the impact of emotions in a principal’s work life led me to consider implications for future research. It would be worthwhile to investigate the impact of fractured roles on the emotions of teaching principals. Twelve of my twenty five teaching years has been as a teaching principal. Emotions within the context of my job have never been addressed through professional development opportunities or school division workshops. Emotional support suggesting we take time for ourselves and families was over-ridden by external demands. Workshops have consistently focused on ‘doing’ rather than ‘feeling’.

Research addressing emotions is relevant at all levels within an organization and could be expanded beyond education into other professions, such as nursing, where interacting with people is a significant component to one’s job. Research analyzing methods used by senior management to support emotions and emotional health in the workplace are worthy of

consideration. Though applicable to other professions, considering the role directors of education, superintendents, and human relations play in ensuring that teaching principals' emotions and feelings connected to all aspects of their job are valued to the same extent as rational thinking is worthy of research. This may specifically be pursued by researching emotional content in mentoring and induction programs, graduate level administration courses.

Personal Reaction to the Research Methodology

Reflecting on choices made for my research methods and methodology, I am assured that autoethnography was my best decision. My research was guided by Anderson's (2006) five key features of autoethnography – the researcher as a complete member of the social world being studied, analytic reflexivity, visibility and active research, dialogue with informants beyond self, and commitment to an analytic agenda – and Ellis' (1996, 2004, 2009) rich descriptions of autoethnographic writing. While Anderson's features framed my research and guided the intellectual me, Ellis' research guided my heart and inspired the emotional me. “The stories I constructed integrated my life and work, connected my life to the lives of others and came from my heart as well as my head” (Ellis, 2009, p. 15) resonated with the researcher and observer sides of me needed for autoethnography.

Autoethnography did not come easily. Finding adequate time for journaling was difficult. After hand writing my journal for a month, I began typing to save time. A benefit to journaling was that documenting the day's events was inherent in my fractured roles. Though reflection was not absent from my research, it was not as prevalent as I had hoped. Time was a primary factor in my ability to be truly reflective. If I were to write another autoethnography, I would try to extend my reflections from how I was feeling to implications around those feelings. This was done to an extent, but I believe I could have been more thorough. That said, limited

reflection reinforces that my job was more reactive than reflective, and I did the best I could with time available.

Though I enjoy writing, writing my autoethnography was emotionally challenging. My fractured roles were so complex, I struggled with what needed to be said and what could be left out. Everything felt important – each story had equal significance in my life. Not sharing a story felt as though I was not honouring the complexity of my roles and the lives of those to whom I was connected. I was equally challenged to find ways to respectfully share stories that hurt and angered me. Though avoiding the stories would have been easier, I would not have been true to autoethnographic methodology. I am confident that I have provided the reader with a true and honest depiction of my fractured roles.

I analyzed the rigor of my autoethnographic research using Richardson's (2000) criteria for judging critical analytical practices. The first criteria involved considering whether I provided substantive contribution to a body of understanding in my social setting. Considered in research were general concerns associated with a teaching principal's role, often focusing on specific managerial and instructional leadership expectations (Dunning, 1993; Wilson & McPake, 2000). I believe my research not only added a rich narrative that included detailed descriptions of the role, but enhanced research by adding emotional responses associated with the roles. My research also added to current research, expanding the term 'role duality' (Dunning) to 'fractured roles'.

Richardson's (2000) second criteria discussed aesthetic merit. Using vignettes, prose and photography to present and connect my research to current literature, my autoethnography was interesting to read, complex and maintained the reader's interest. Reflexivity, the author's awareness of epistemology and postmodernism, the gathering of information and ethical

questions describe Richardson's third criteria. Autoethnography fits a constructivism-interpretivism paradigm (McIlveen, 2008), which supports multiple, constructed realities influenced by a person's interactions and perceptions of their social environment. Using NVivo, data were collected daily between November 2009 and July 2010 from three sources: a typed journal, a 'What I Do' log, indicating what I did, the role I played and the time it took to fulfill the role, and a hand written reflective journal was analyzed. Carol, Racquel and Carla gave me verbal permission to quote them. Pseudonyms were used when discussing or describing people in my vignettes and analysis.

Though I cannot speak to readers' responses to my autoethnography, I believe they will, as Richardson (2000) suggests in her fourth criteria, be moved emotionally and intellectually. My narratives are emotional in nature, and reflect real people and real situations. I believe my research will not leave the reader unaffected, but will provoke new thoughts, ideas, and perhaps change. My autoethnography fits Richardson's fifth criteria that autoethnography must express a reality and text must be a credible lived experience. Because my vignettes are written from personal experience and supported by data from my personal journals and 'What I Do' log, I know them to be true. I obtained research credibility through peer debriefing with my supervisor.

This research process changed me both as a researcher and an educator. As a researcher, I better understand the importance of accurate documentation, and especially in reflective research, going 'deeper'. Though a qualitative researcher at heart, I learned the value of quantitative research. Reviewing statistical data gleaned from my 'what I do' log, time-specific aspects of my job – time spent in each role, absence from school and contact with parents – shocked me. As an educator, I have come to understand the relationship between time, expectations, and feeling competent in my job. I appreciate the value in taking time for

reflection and more fully understand the importance of my life having a personal and professional balance. Professionally, the research process has given me confidence to voice my concerns around the negative impact of the ‘slipstream syndrome’ on teaching principals and exceptionally small rural schools.

Professional/Personal Growth

Reflecting on the power of autoethnography, I consider my professional and personal growth that evolved from this methodology. Dealing with complexities associated with my roles, I had not previously taken time to consider how my time was used. My journaling and ‘what I do’ log provided data and validated my belief that I was busy. I was surprised to learn that over half my administration time was spent outside my office. I was equally surprised that I was absent from school for 32 full or half days. One hundred five documented contacts with three parents also confirmed the time I put into developing parent relationships.

My research helped me understand that my challenges and frustrations did not arise from an inability to do my job but from the context of my situation. Dunning’s (1993) research around ‘role duality’ and the ‘slipstream syndrome’ helped me put my situation into an understandable context. I came to understand that these struggles were not unique to me. My concerns were supported by research indicating that teaching principals in small schools similarly experience challenges with dual roles and meeting expectations set for larger schools that leave them feeling inadequate and frustrated (Dunning, 1993; Starr & White, 2008).

A personal experience occurring after my research reinforced this lesson. Looking at my teacher lesson plans from this past year and knowing they did not reflect my best work, a wave of ‘not good enough’ washed over me. Interestingly, going through previous lesson plans as a teaching principal with 85% administration time, I was reminded how effective I had been. As

pleased as I was with these lesson plans, I was equally as displeased with those from the past year. Last years' plans did not reflect a bad teacher or intentional bad planning, but a situation where I was torn in many directions and lacked time to adequately plan.

Rereading Ellis' (2004) comment, [I] "write about experiences that knock me for a loop and challenge the construction of meaning I have put together for myself...I write when my world falls apart or the meaning I have constructed for myself is in danger of doing so" (p. 33), I am reassured that my choice to focus on difficulties associated with my job as a teaching principal in an exceptionally rural school honoured the nature of autoethnographic writing. That said, I fully support my school and other exceptionally small rural schools. My personal mantra became, "Within the walls we're O.K". Staff commitment to team, students and families, community trust and support in staff, and roles I played ensuring students' positive social, academic and extra-curricular growth reinforced my beliefs around the value of our exceptionally small rural school.

Autoethnography reinforced my 'I can do it' personality, that amid frustrations and self-doubt I'm a survivor. Placed into a challenging situation, I will do everything in my power to make it work. Reading "I really consider myself as a custodian, probably a fierce angel," (Wallace, 2010, p. 605), I leaned back in my chair, said, "Oh my" and stared at the page in shock. Once again, my personal experiences not only connected to research, but Wallace gave a research voice to my angel. For all the emotions connected to my angel statue and woven through my poetry, 'fierce angel' more than aptly describes her, and therefore me. My 'fierce angel' personality was especially evident when advocating for students or supporting staff through external expectations.

Though I was frustrated, angry, and at times left feeling quite battered, reflections associated with my autoethnographic writing helped strengthen my belief that I am a person with hope. Though I may have felt I was in a situation with little control, I reiterate Ellis' (2004) comment that autoethnography does not portray the writer as a victim. I believe in the best in people. I believe situations can improve and trust that rightness and justice will prevail.

With her 'fierce angel' wings lifted and ready to stand tall, speaking through my angel statue I ended my day with hope:



Figure 5: Hope

*Today she lives in hope –
sad
relaxed
protecting
self
feelings
sense of worth*

*With wings unfurled
ready to take flight
ready to start anew
ready to let go*

*She clings to the source, the core
of all she is
strong
able
weak
afraid*

*Contradiction
and
a unified whole.*

Ready

March 4, 2010

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